

*Benoit  
Castain*



*Marcel  
Prévost*

*Alvarez*

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# BENOIT CASTAIN

BY

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## I

I HAD never seen Benoit Castain before the present war. Yet we might easily have met, for his father, Monsieur Castain, or the "Widower" as he is called, has been for some years manager of an estate near mine at the point where the departments of Gers, Landes, and Lot et Garonne touch and intermingle. Castain is reputed to be capable and honest, but also somewhat selfish and tyrannical. Our relations were restricted to formal exchanges of conversation on market days, at meetings of the local authority, or on the occasion of the trial of a new piece of agricultural machinery—a sulphur-dusting apparatus, or a new kind of plough or automatic sower—an event which always attracts every

farmer and manager of an estate in the neighbourhood.

But young Castain never attended market, meeting, or experiments. At the age of eighteen, after easily obtaining his diploma as a secondary school teacher, he was sent to Saxony by his father, who intended him to follow an agricultural career. "You see, sir," said Castain, "for matters requiring organisation no one is equal to the Germans. And agriculture is a matter of organisation."

Immediately after his return from Germany the young man served his term of military service in the artillery, in one of the eastern fortresses; but when he had completed his two years and reached the rank of bombardier, he re-enlisted.

His father was astounded.

"Can you believe it? A well-educated young fellow, who knows more about farming than I do; who can speak German like the Crown Prince; who can write like a professor (it seems that he used to write verses at school), now wants to go and be a soldier!



I argued with him, but he is more obstinate even than I am. The working of a gun interests him more than that of the last model of a threshing-machine. And to think of how he could have helped me here. . . .”

In short, in the space of five years Benoit hardly spent five days at home, and never at a moment when I happened to be there.

About three months after the outbreak of war, I received a note from M. Castain in the entrenched camp of Paris, where I was then stationed. He wrote substantially as follows :

“My son has been wounded for the second time, and promoted quartermaster on the field of battle, quite near Epernay, and is now in Auxiliary Hospital No. 15 at Versailles. I cannot leave here, for, what with no servants and almost no horses left to work with, it is as much as I can do to keep things going on the estate. If what I hear is true, you are serving near Versailles; you would do me a great service if you

would go and see Benoit. He does not complain; he assures me that his second wound, which is in his head (the first one was in his right leg), is practically healed, but his letters are so depressed that I do not know what to make of it. I cannot help thinking that the boy is hiding something from me, and I feel uneasy about him."

As soon as I was free, I went to Versailles, after sending word to Benoit the evening before to say that I was coming. No. 15 Auxiliary Hospital is installed in a former convent of the Redemptionists, not far from Trianon. Two or three very young men met me at the door; I followed one of them through long, well-polished passages; we passed several rosy, round-cheeked nurses dressed in white, making room as we did so on the strip of linoleum. My guide stopped before a door on the first floor, numbered 21 on a little porcelain shield. He opened it, ushered me in, and left me. I was alone with young Castain.

He was evidently profoundly touched by

my visit, but it took some time to discover how grateful he was behind his grave manner, his timid silence, and his respect for my stripes. He appeared to be good-looking, slender and tall. It was not possible to judge entirely of his face, because a bandage round his head partly hid his forehead and only left a few fair hairs showing. This sorry garb contrasted with the clear-cut structure of his face; the agreeable and refined features; the bright and healthy complexion, in which the blood came and went at the slightest emotion; the small, dark, mobile eyes which alone betrayed his Gascon origin. I then remembered that his father used to say, "My poor wife came from the north; she was a very distinguished-looking woman. . . ." Benoit Castain had, as they say, taken after his mother.

In spite of the bandage and of the loose grey woollen garment which was the regulation hospital dress, he looked more like a cavalry officer who had been maimed in the war, than a heavy artillery-man who a few months before had been a mere bombardier.

His conversation did not destroy the illusion ; his speech was slow and considered, always correct, sometimes original, and frequently interrupted by periods of silence ; his manner was modest, but the firmness of his expression and of his general demeanour saved him from any appearance of servility. He was evidently reluctant to speak of himself. In fine, he was an example of that rare and attractive combination of timidity and energy which gave this son of a country bailiff a certain real air of distinction.

I took very much to Benoit Castain. Yet our first conversation lacked ease. I first spoke to him of his father and of our common home-country, but I missed that ardent gleam which usually lights up the eyes of wounded men when one evokes the memory of home.

“ Oh, yes ; certainly it is a good place. It is jollier there than in these parts. . . . ”

That was all.

Evidently this child of the south-west was no longer touched by the memory of our moors and vineyards. Evidently, too,

father and son were not comrades, friends. "He is even more obstinate than I am," his father had said, speaking of his son. It was clear that these two stubborn beings had not been able to get on well together, and that was why Benoit had rejoined the army.

I gave up the subject of home and tried to draw Benoit on the subject of his wounds. His face immediately flushed scarlet, and I really believe he would not have answered if his sense of discipline had not constrained him. But his reply was hardly a reply at all.

"I got the first one at the beginning of the war—before the declaration even—and the other—oh, but my father has told you all about it—at the battle of the Marne, in September. My father is anxious about the second one, but he ought not to be. I have told him the truth in my letters, and if you would like to speak to the major, sir, he will assure you that I shall be about again in a few days. The wound in the head is healed, the one in the neck is healing."

He was so visibly embarrassed that I did not press him further; and as silence weighed upon us in that little monastic room looking out on to untidy and confused bits of garden, I kept to the one great, inexhaustible question common to us all—the war.

Benoit was more at his ease now; he even ventured to ask me certain questions which showed that he read the papers intelligently and was accustomed to ponder what he read. He seemed worried over what would be done with him when he was cured. I understood, without his actually saying anything, that he was very eager to go back quickly to the front, eager in a rather nervous way which was surprising in a man who looked so well-balanced. He said he did not care to have leave to go home. "I have had enough rest here," he said with that earnest, somewhat discontented manner of his when I urged him to take advantage of a respite that he had earned.

When I left him after this first interview, at which I had made nearly all the conversa-

tion, I little foresaw that less than a month later, Benoit Castain, alone with me in this same hospital cell, would talk to me for more than an hour on end without interruption, and would tell me his whole story without a single pause. . . . For him to reach that point it had been necessary for the deepest fibres of his heart to be touched by my persistence in visiting him.

Contrary to his expectation, the wound in his neck—due to a shrapnel splinter—did not heal. X-rays revealed a fragment of bark buried in the muscle; the shell had burst near a clump of young oaks. He needed a long spell of nursing, and time for nature to bring into operation all its capacities for ejecting a foreign body from the system. I thus had an opportunity of seeing the convalescent pretty often. He had asked me for books, and I had had some sent to him from Paris. This provided us with subjects of conversation. I now came to see that his father had judged him aright, and that he had a taste for literature. He discussed it with judgment, without letting

fly any of those depressing blunders which even creep into the conversation of people who are supposed to be well educated. Several notes he wrote to me between my visits even surprised me; they revealed a somewhat rare gift of expressing ideas in words. Like many well-educated but shy people, Benoit wrote much better than he spoke. His speech, which was formed for the ears and minds of people in his own rank in life, was only more correct and accurate than theirs, but his writing faithfully reflected the originality and harmony of his inner thoughts. On the other hand, his modesty, his quiet good manners, his gratitude for what I did for him—never degenerating into obsequiousness—and a series of small things which indicated the warmth and depth of a character in which secret passion was kept under control by strong will, gradually completed the charm by which he had at first attracted me. But I should not be quite sincere if I did not confess to curiosity being one of the reasons of my interest. I was now convinced that this tall, handsome



fellow, beneath whose cold exterior there burnt so fierce a fire, bore through life the burden of a trouble or a sorrow by the side of which his parents, his future, and even his recovery, hardly counted in the balance. In the beginning I thought that this trouble was some family quarrel, or the misunderstanding which seemed to exist between him and his father. But it was not that, for, as he came to be more confidential with me, Benoit spoke very simply about his father.

“Well, you know him,” he said; “he is pure gold . . . but he cannot live in the same house as any one else without ordering them about and bullying them. Every sentence he utters begins ‘Do this!’ or ‘Why have you done that?’ and in a nagging voice too! It made my poor mother into a nervous invalid, and it certainly hastened her end. . . . So it is better that he and I should live apart. Then we cannot quarrel, and we can write to one another, and we know that we are good friends in spite of everything!”

Thus spoke Benoit, while the faintest of smiles just flickered beneath his thin light-brown moustache. And such candour made still more inexplicable to me his determined silence, and the sudden fits of reserve which came upon him as soon as the conversation either drifted or was directed by me towards that other subject, the incidents of the war with which he had been concerned, or the fights in which he had been wounded. He always answered in the same way, almost in the same words—"One, right at the beginning of the war, in the leg; the other near Epernay, in September. . . ."

About the second one I learnt some particulars from the doctor. Benoit had been caught by a shrapnel splinter while he was superintending the operation of advancing a .155 gun up the edge of a slope. . . . But it was impossible to find out anything about his first wound in the calf of the leg; this one was now healed and only made him limp a little when he was not thinking about it. Whenever he spoke of it he would blush, stammer, and his embarrassment was

so visible that it deprived me of the right as well as of the desire to press him further.

Towards the end of November my duties compelled me to stay a week at Versailles, and I saw Benoit Castain nearly every day. At his instigation, I had taken steps to endeavour to obtain for him the favour of not being sent home to recuperate, but of being allowed to go back to the front immediately after he had reported himself at the depot. When I was able to tell him that I hoped to succeed, he took my hand and shook it warmly, the depth of his gratitude for a moment transforming his whole face, and, as it were, revealing the real sensibility of his heart. Then he said something which apparently had no connection with what had passed, though I felt I understood what he meant.

“Do not be angry with me, sir,—I want so much to tell you—but I cannot—I cannot get it out——”

And yet it was to come out that very day in the course of that very visit! I can remember the whole scene exactly. It was

a Sunday, one of those beautiful Sundays of the end of November with light clouds and shafts of sunshine. Now and then the sick man's room was brightly lit up by a golden ray, which threw the shadow of one of the window-bars across the white bed. Then those vague neglected bits of garden which lay along the other side of the road seemed to become alive again and reflect the sunshine in the gleaming leaves of laurel and spindle-wood tree. Above the hedge they formed, a climbing rose raised its sickly head, blossoming in spite of autumn wind and chilly rain. Meanwhile Benoit was carefully explaining to me his opinion of *Mauprat*, which I had lent to him, and which he had just finished. He thought a moment, and then said to me :

“Yes, you sometimes find beautiful things in novels. But more surprising things happen in life ! If I were to tell you . . . !”

“If I were to tell you !” that phrase which is so often heard by whoever makes a trade of writing. When it is spoken by a mincing, bedizened minx, or by a prosperous

tradesman whose head has been turned by the success with the other sex which his money gives him, or by those innumerable sentimentalists who think they play a part in the world of feeling and in reality are mere puppets, experience teaches us to beat a hasty retreat. You will waste your time and it will profit you nothing. But when it was pronounced by this thoughtful, reserved creature, it took form and meaning. It meant that the weight of silence was becoming too great for his shy soul; whatever it cost he must unburden himself to another. I helped him as best I could, avoiding all semblance of curiosity. But henceforward his restlessness was only due to his need of unbosoming himself. It was long, slow, and painful. . . . The beginning of his story came out bit by bit, broken by periods of hesitation or of silence. . . . But when Benoit reached its climax his eyes lit up, his tongue was loosened, and the cloud of shyness cleared from his face. I might have taken down every word he said, and his story would have been clear, picturesque,

and moving ; and in fact I did write it down from memory as soon as I got back to my quarters. I had, of course, to take some trouble arranging and recasting that part which forms the introduction to Benoit's own private story, and that is what I shall now proceed to lay before the reader ; but I shall leave Castain to use his own words when we reach the moment when his speech grew impassioned and vivid. The final part, which he sent me himself in writing, will connect quite naturally with my notes.

No doubt this diversity in the "copy" will produce something less harmonious as a whole than if I had remodelled it throughout, balancing the different parts, filling up the voids, and softening the diction ; I could have done so without difficulty. I could also easily have developed and analysed what remains rather curt and vague in the tale : the character of the only woman who plays a part in it. Benoit Castain found it difficult sufficiently to overcome his rather frightened shyness to give me even the merest outline of her, for, indeed, if he had

not found this so difficult he would not have been Benoit Castain! I could easily have put in all the work of polishing and adjusting in the course of those evenings which military duties leave unoccupied and free from time to time even in war-time, and which I have devoted to putting these notes in order. If I had done so, perhaps a well-constructed novel would have been the result, but, in my view, that would not have compensated for the loss in truthfulness and vitality which it would have suffered. It is just its very unevenness of texture, its roughness and incompleteness, which will enable the reader, as it seems to me, to feel what I felt when I heard it. And in the times we live in, is it not the first duty of the writer to try and convey a sense of reality with the least possible amount of artifice?

The only divergence from strict truth which I have allowed myself has been to change, not only the names of people, but also of places as well. It would be useless to consult a map to find them; they are not to be found.

## II

IT will be remembered that when on July 29, 1914, Germany proclaimed "a state of war," France on her side also adopted precautionary measures, but, from scruples which now seem excessive, kept the main body of her covering troops at a distance of about ten kilometres from the frontier. At that time Benoit was quartermaster in a battery at Fort Cissey, in the neighbourhood of the three frontiers of France, Luxemburg, and the annexed part of Lorraine. Fort Cissey commands the fine hilly road between Busshofen in Lorraine and Uffigny in France. In the spring preceding the outbreak of war the French General Staff became aware that an extensive wooded eminence behind Cissey, upon which stands the castle with the



village of Uffigny a little farther in the rear, constituted a marvellously well-adapted defensive position, so that if the fort itself should fall into the hands of the enemy (an improbable event, it was thought, since it was armed and constructed according to the most modern theories) he would not be able to debouch from his position if the hill of Uffigny was put into a state of defence. But the money needed for carrying out the work was not forthcoming. Nothing was consequently done beyond determining and preparing the emplacement for a group of quick-firing guns near the summit, in a hollow in the woods which grow all round the hill and are known as the Woods of Haume.

Modest as these preparations for defence were, specialists agreed that, thanks to the unusual configuration of the ground and to the impossibility of locating the group of guns in the wood, no German attack would be able to advance beyond the valley.

When the diplomatic situation was beginning to get more and more tangled, the

authorities began to think of the armament for the Haume battery, but the four guns destined for it had not yet been supplied by the factory.

Four others were therefore urgently asked for from a fortified position of secondary importance in the neighbourhood; meantime the engineers completed the earthworks and platforms. At the same time sites for heavy batteries were selected round Uffigny, but they were only to be constructed if war broke out. In order to connect up the fort and the region in the rear of it, telephonic communication was established between Uffigny and Cisse; it was indeed proposed to erect a wireless station at the château in one of the turrets flanking the main entrance. As Benoit Castain understood the working of radio-telegraphic instruments, and was known to be intelligent and reliable, and moreover could speak German, he was put in charge at Uffigny with three gunners, a corporal, and a cyclist. All six lodged in the telephone turret of the château.

The château is a great building dating from the end of the eighteenth century, with a tower of the time of Walter Scott. It was not at that moment fully occupied, the only people living there being a caretaker, Joseph Archer by name, and known as Joze, and his daughter Gertrude, with a little servant-girl of sixteen. They inhabited the turret on the other side of the main entrance. In addition to them a young Alsatian called Rimsbach, who acted as night-watchman, had his bed there. He was known as "le manchot" in the village because he had been born with a deformed right hand and arm.

When rumours of war began to spread about, the owners were expected at the château every day. They were Russians or, rather, Russian Poles, by name Somski, who, charmed by the situation and the reputation of the estate for game, had bought it eight years previously. Every year they came there just before the shooting season opened, and left again as soon as the cold weather set in. Baron

Somski was a banker from Lodz; he was short and thick-set, with big cheeks hanging in dewlaps; with a dull complexion, whiskers turning grey, a pink bald pate, stumpy hands with fingers like sausages; and, withal, an ardent sportsman and an excellent shot. The baroness, large and overfed like her husband, but of a more slender, elegant, and aristocratic type, still retained traces of beauty in her plump faded features. Three children, two girls and a little boy much younger than the apparent age of the father and mother would have led one to expect, completed the family. They were pretty children, but overdressed, noisy, and talkative, chattering German, English, and French, and another tongue which the inhabitants of Uffigny were unable to classify, but which was, no doubt, Polish or Russian. A numerous troop of servants, recruited in every country of Europe, accompanied the Somski. A Circassian, wearing a long-haired fur cap and a short sabre hanging from his girdle of gilt leather, served as

porter, to the wonder of the villagers. The little boy's nurse, with her yellow face and snub-nose, looked as though she came from Mongolia. The chef was Italian; the housemaids Austrian and English. A pack of hounds and hunters with Polish huntsmen were lodged in the vast out-buildings which had been fitted up for the purpose.

For seven or eight weeks these people filled Uffigny and the neighbourhood with the turmoil of their excursions on horse-back or in motor cars, of their picnics, their games of tennis and golf, and their tango. One of the numerous farms on the estate, the most distant from the château, called Gourdenange, whose land spread over into Luxemburg, was transformed into a kind of Trianon, and there the baroness played lavishly at being Marie Antoinette, and night and day held al-fresco parties. . . . All the neighbouring country houses, which were generally more or less fast asleep, now woke up and prepared to take advantage of the presence of the Somski. The officers

of the neighbouring garrisons were invited to stay, and were treated like princes, for Somski had a weakness for the army. As for the inhabitants of Uffigny, the masters of the château were a kind of Fortunatus's purse for them. The Somski never bargained; every subscription list sent in to them had its total swollen by at least 100 francs. Every autumn when they left, the baroness gave a sum of twenty-five pounds to the mayor and another twenty-five to the curé. After these final benefactions the whole family quitted the château like a whirlwind, as they had come. Park, woods, game-preserves, gardens, and the great eighteenth-century building, with its incongruous tower, went to sleep again with no one to guard it but father Joze, Gertrude, and "le manchot." At the same time, at the other end of the estate, the model farm of Gourdenange returned once more for the rest of the year to its ordinary normal life, with its cows, oxen, pigs, and chickens; its butter, cheese, and curds and whey—under the intermittent supervision of Joze.

During those feverish days at the end of July 1914 when certain of the well-to-do people of the country, panic-stricken before there was any actual danger, had already fled, no one was surprised that the masters of the château did not come. Moreover, their representative at Uffigny, Joze Archer, showed himself, as soon as the crisis began, to be one of the calmest and most level-headed men in the village, reassuring the timid, and exhorting every one to stay quietly where he was.

“Of course,” he would say at the Golden Wheel, where men of his age were wont to assemble about five o’clock to have a drink and play a hand of cards, “of course, we are a little too near the volcano here, but even if cinders do begin to fall about our ears, is it not better for us to be on the spot to prevent an outbreak of fire? Besides, there is no cause for alarm. The Boches are not going to get through here this time.”

They listened to him and approved what he said, for was he not a veteran of 1870? and had he not shown his papers to several

people in Uffigny, together with a letter of congratulation which a superior officer in Bourbaki's army had written to him? Having come there only eight years before—which hardly counts in the country—he had succeeded in getting himself accepted by the natives as one of themselves, thanks to his kindness, his good-temper, and to the help which he was always ready to give liberally when a demand was made on the generosity or the credit of his masters. Moreover the baron and the baroness seemed to think a great deal of him.

Although in reality his duties were those of an agent, he was not in the least proud. Tall and thin as a poplar, and, to judge by his face and hair, an old man, he was supple enough in his limbs to make younger men jealous. He never tried to dress like a gentleman, and for that he was liked. He always wore a cap, on week-days an old shabby one and on Sundays a clean one, and he used to frequent the village wine-shop, where he would clink glasses with the humblest workman. He had been



elected a town councillor. When his wife died in child-bed, the way in which he set himself to bring up his daughter Gertrude won him respect. She was treated like a child of the country; when she came to Uffigny she had been a mere baby, and there she had been educated at the village school, there she had been confirmed at the village church, and there, under the eyes of the whole population, she had grown up into a pretty chubby girl, as amiable as her father, and perhaps even more obliging; and, withal, as straight as a die.

The two turrets of the château, in one of which the telephone station was installed, while in the other Archer and his daughter lived, stood opposite one another on either side of the main entrance-gate, about forty yards apart. . . . Yet so taken up was he with the fitting up of his apparatus, that Benoit Castain until the end of July hardly found time to do more than pass the time of day with his pretty neighbour. Besides he was much too shy to venture to speak to her first.

“I hardly believe that I even looked at her,” he said to me. “I had other things to think about: my wireless apparatus did not come; I was very worried. I thought I was doing no good. Then they sent me a dynamo, and the rest of the instruments dribbled in piecemeal . . . altogether I was much too anxious so much as to think of any girl at Uffigny. . . .”

On the other hand, he had at once made the acquaintance of Joze Archer, who obligingly smoothed over the little difficulties which arose over using a room in the château for fitting up his apparatus. They got on perfectly together from the very first. The older man was keen and optimistic, and had a way of saying encouraging things at a moment when the fatal results of lack of foresight in 1870 were present to every one's mind. It is true that Benoit Castain had seen his comrades and his chiefs at work. He knew how well prepared his bit of the army was, and with what calm courage every one faced the possibility of war. But still it cheered his heart to hear

this veteran, who had been through that dreadful retreat to Pontarlier forty-four years before, declare with conviction that we were perfectly ready, and this time the Boches would blunt their claws on the French breastplates. Benoit too liked to hear the old fellow boast of the defences of Cisse, and of what he called "your fort," where he had just completed his first year's service since he re-enlisted.

"I have seen some of their men in Germany, when I accompanied the baron on his travels," related Archer; "they look all right from a distance, but I heard that there is more show than real efficiency about them; many of them have no rifles, or only old ones. For you see they have not got the money: when you have to defend yourself on two frontiers, east and west, you need too much. . . . As for the soldiers, they live under the threat of the stick; but if you kill their officers, you will see how quickly they will surrender or skoot! I know them!"

### III

MILITARY telephonists naturally call one another up and exchange the news, even when it is not, strictly speaking, official. Although his mouth was firmly closed in regard to "official" news, Benoit communicated to the villagers the trifling bits of general information which his friends gave him over the telephone, scraps of conversations they had heard or of news they had read in the papers. In this way Uffigny was kept posted about the course of events as the crisis became more and more grave. . . . On Thursday there was a gleam of hope that peace would be maintained, a *détente* was anticipated in the relations between Russia and Austria. On Friday, Russia, tired of being tricked, mobilised. On Saturday morning, mobilisa-

tion was considered so certain in France that the mayor of Uffigny proceeded to requisition the horses of the district; at all the frontier posts a patriotic anxiety not to be too late made every one restless. All owners of horses in the parish were warned to hold their wheeled vehicles and horses in readiness; they were to be brought to the paddock of the château, which had been luxuriously laid out on the opposite side of the main building to the turrets flanking the entrance, and about eight hundred yards behind it; a separate gate gave access to it from the road. When therefore, that very day, at about five o'clock, the church bell rang out the alarm through the heavy summer air, it was expected and took no one by surprise. At Uffigny, as elsewhere, women wiped their eyes with their check handkerchiefs; as elsewhere, the young fellows talked big and sang the "Marseillaise." But there, as throughout the land of France, from Bayonne to Nancy, from Dunkirk to Mentone, every one breathed more freely,

and the general feeling was expressed in the words, "Anything is better than the wretched peace in which we were groveling. Things could not go on as they were. . . ."

The inspection of the horses was ordered for next morning, Sunday, at nine o'clock. The owners were prompt. By a quarter-past eight nearly the whole contingent was already assembled on the green carpet of the paddock : good plough and draft horses with round cruppers, which their masters, in the pride of their hearts, had groomed to perfection, combing their manes and trimming their pasterns ; keen farm nags full of oats, but yet whose flanks never have time to fill out with the long hours they spend trotting on the roads ; old hacks belonging to travelling hucksters, half-starved but never tired ; every sort and kind of horse needed for the work of the land was there under the care of their masters. These latter were peasants, well shaven and dressed in their Sunday best ; among them were also a few women to be

seen, plump gossips, their tongues never still, talking to their nags when there was no one else to talk to. A little apart from the others there were drawn up the pleasure horses ; a pair of chestnuts held by a coachman ; smart cobs accustomed to the shafts of dog-carts ; hunters, and even a racer held by a boy with a pink freckled face. Every one was eager and alert as they waited for the military commission, who were to arrive at half-past nine. Eyes glanced down to the turning of the road, which could just be seen through a quickset hedge, and up to the bluish sky beyond the dip in the hills above the heights of Fort Cissey ; and the thought was in every one's mind that over there the enemy too was getting ready to strike.

Just at that moment an event took place unheard of in the history of former wars between great civilised nations, and yet one of which several examples have been observed in the neighbourhood of our frontiers. The sound of still distant cavalry made every one prick up their ears and

glance towards the dense wood in the park whose fringe was visible a little behind the château, and which from there grew thickly for about a couple of miles as far as the farm of Gourdenange. Yes . . . there was no doubt about it . . . the rhythmic trot of a numerous band of horsemen was approaching from that direction. . . . Suddenly from the central avenue there emerged a dozen horsemen dressed in pale grey, wearing helmets surmounted by a flat plate, their lances in their rests, and revolvers in their hands; they charged down on the paddock, firing a few harmless shots as they came and surrounded the group of horses and men, whilst one of them, similar to the others at first sight, who appeared to be their leader, pulled up his foaming charger in front of the freckled groom, and putting his revolver to his head, cried in French: “Réquisition; Réquisition de l’Empereur . . . donner tous les chevaux tout de suite!”

More from surprise than from fear they obeyed him. Every one was so busy



wondering how on earth they had come that at first they did not think of defending themselves. Unarmed, or provided merely with sticks, they could do nothing but lead their horses into the circle formed by the horsemen. . . . "The Uhlans: The Uhlans," they whispered to one another; war was not yet declared and here were the vultures already in France. Judging by the direction, they must have come from Luxemburg; just where, trusting loyally to the barrier created by a neutral state, the French thought they were safe. With impotent rage the peasants gazed up at the big fellows sitting erect on their horses holding their revolvers pointed. By order of the officer two of them had dismounted. He quickly pointed out to them the horses which he thought worth taking, and they tied them by the halter to a cord they had brought with them. . . .

It was all so unexpected, and one thing followed so rapidly on another, that the French were paralysed, and stood with bent shoulders as though overtaken by a thunder-

storm. . . . The officer felt that he must make haste, for if one of the peasants started to resist it would be the signal for all of them to turn upon him; he cursed and hit the two Uhlans with his whip for not acting quickly enough to please him, and called up others to dismount and lend a hand.

Their bold stroke would probably have succeeded if instead of the thirty horses which they expected to find they had not found fifty, of which more than twenty were worth stealing. The whole band of robbers were about to make off with their booty by the same road by which they had come, when a motor-car entered the park at full speed containing officers in French uniforms; a shot rang out and a Uhlan fell to the ground. This broke the spell which till then had held the peasants in its grip. They threw themselves on the Uhlans, indifferent to revolver shots and lance thrusts, pulling them by the leg from their saddles, slashing the bellies of their horses, fighting against their swords with sticks. At the

same time those who had come in the motor-car jumped down and joined in the fray. There were four of them, an officer of the "Chasseurs," a "vet" armed with good service revolvers, the soldier-chaffeur, and the secretary of the commission, and they charged down on the Germans with their sabres. . . . The lieutenant in command of the Uhlans stood his ground boldly, attempting to rally his men. Soon the combatants became a tangled mass of grey uniforms, blue blouses, and rearing horses. The young freckled groom and the coachman rolled on the trampled bloody grass; the charger of one of the Uhlans collapsed on to its rider; several frightened horses galloped off and spread the alarm in the village. . . .

The struggle came to an end as suddenly as it had arisen. Three clear rifle-shots rang out close by; two Uhlans fell from their saddles with a hoarse cry of pain, while a third dropped from the saddle of his horse as it galloped off mad with terror. There was a second salvo, and this time it was the officer

who fell. Then all the Uhlans who were left tried to fly, desperately spurring their horses till the blood ran, and, followed by bullets which did not touch them, plunged at full speed into the woods and disappeared.

Now it was possible to see whence the unexpected succour had come which determined the victory: Gertrude Archer, hearing the first revolver-shots which were fired by the German officer, had run to the château; she had seen the struggle from some distance and had immediately bethought herself of returning as quickly as possible to the telephone turret.

“It was only then, sir,” said Benoit, “that I really saw her for the first time. Flushed and with her light-brown hair blown loose—with her hands to her panting breast—excited but perfectly brave—she said to me, ‘Come quickly, quartermaster, the Prussians are there.’ We were only four, for the corporal and the cyclist were absent; but we took our rifles and started. She wanted to come with us. . . . She was not

in the least afraid; as one of my men said (it was Courtaud, who was killed in a very sad way afterwards), "With a bit of a lieutenant like that, with flaxen hair, a red cotton bodice and a short skirt, why, it's a pleasure to go out and fight!"

They were all four good shots; and crouching behind a low wall supporting an iron railing near the paddock, Benoit and the others each brought down his man methodically with each shot. Then they came out into the field of battle, where the officers of the Commission and the peasants, and now most of the population of the village, were busy taking stock of the losses. Five of the horses of the Uhlans were lying dead, two were in their death agony kicking and screaming on the ground. The five Uhlans who had been shot seemed to be dead, and among them lay the officer lying on his side, still grasping the butt of his revolver. Benoit bent over him and raised the empty hand to see the marks of rank on the sleeves. Suddenly the officer half raised himself up and fired at him twice; the shots

passed through Benoit's left leg and he fell. Thereupon Courtaud, enraged at this treachery, fired point blank into the officer's face, who fell back dead this time with his brains blown out. They lifted up Benoit, who was unable to stand, and carried him to the nearest house, which happened to be the part of the château where the Archers lived, and there Gertrude had him laid on a bed in an unoccupied room on the ground floor next to that of Joze. The doctor of Uffigny was summoned, and had just finished dressing his leg—the wound was not serious, but both bullets had passed right through the calf of the leg in the same place—when Joze arrived, riding one of the horses of the farm and leading the other by the halter. He had not seen the Uhlans on his way there, but coming back he had been warned by the sound of their galloping horses as they fled . . . he had just had time to hide with his horses in a copse when the panic-stricken soldiers passed by quite close to him, but without seeing him. . . .

## IV

AFTER this memorable Sunday Europe was shaken from end to end by one great event after another: the violation of the neutrality of Luxemburg and then of Belgium; the fatal interview between M. de Jagow and the British Ambassador; England's declaration of war on Germany; Germany's declaration of war on France and Russia; the bombardment of Liége, its resistance, and the German offensive suddenly arrested by the heroism of a small nation; the invasion of Alsace and of Lorraine by the French. For a time the thunder of the French seventy-fives made Europe hope that the German Moloch was about to crumble to pieces, and that once more the tricolour and the "Marseillaise" would set the world free.

Benoit Castain spent the whole of that spell of hopefulness, which was destined to come to an end about the 20th August at Morhange and Charleroi, in the house of Joze Archer. Those who may feel surprise at a non-commissioned officer on the active list being taken care of by civilians instead of being transferred to a military hospital must remember how exceptional his case was: wounded before war was declared, at a moment when both armies were proceeding to mobilise, and when no military hospital was ready to receive him. The old doctor of Uffigny, Dr. Beval, concerted with the surgeon-major of Fort Cisse to oppose his being moved. They disregarded all objections which existed on the score of irregularity, for they had other things to think of. Castain was not even replaced at the telephone station. When his wound had been well dressed, he had at once been put to bed, and his fever had dropped almost immediately; by consulting him in matters of difficulty the corporal and his men found it quite possible to attend to the work of



the telephone between them. In this way, instead of that monotony of an hospital which he was to taste to the full later on, the wounded quartermaster felt as though he were being nursed in his own home.

When he told me that part of his story which related to his convalescence at Jozé's house he was least at his ease and most reticent. And yet what irked him so much to confess was the most natural thing in the world and one which I had suspected as soon as he began to speak. Amid the general excitement aroused by the outbreak of war a young handsome fellow of twenty-three is taken wounded to a house inhabited solely by an old veteran and his daughter; the daughter is kind and attentive; the father, knowing he can trust her, and having complete confidence in the wounded man, allows his daughter full liberty in the exercise of her duties as nurse. . . .

It is not necessary to be gifted with second-sight or to be a psychologist in order to foretell what sentiment will grow up between the young man and his nurse.

It would only have been abnormal if, each of them being disengaged, they had remained indifferent to one another. I tried to make Benoit understand this so as to help him in his confession ; but his lips for a long time refused to mention what for her and for him transformed those few days of August into the wonderful fairyland of a first love. He spoke of her in order to give me an idea of what she was like, and blushed scarlet when he alluded to her fair hair, her little head “just like an apple,” her neat waist, and her skilful way of helping him—“her hands were so cool that when she touched you it did you as much good as a breeze in spring.” He did not yet tell me that he loved her and she him, and I really believe that until exterior events forced them more closely together the word love had never been pronounced by either. Moreover, circumstances helped to develop their intimacy. Old Joze hardly appeared except at meal-times ; sometimes even he would stay away all day or all night. Since war had broken out he was much worried over

the responsibility which fell upon him as agent; he was always out on the estate between Cisseey and Gourdenange, leaving Rimsbach in charge of the château. His fixed idea was that there would be another raid by the Uhlans.

“And what shall I say to the baron, who is stranded in Poland, if, when peace is signed, he comes back to Uffigny to find his château pillaged and burnt?”

Thus Benoit and his daughter were left to spend long hours together undisturbed. At first they were just a wounded man and his nurse; then, as anxiety and pain diminished, they came to know each other's personalities. Gertrude would say to him, “I cannot regret having given the alarm, and yet if I had not called you, you would not be lying wounded now. . . .” And Benoit would answer, “It is quite natural to be wounded when one is a soldier and there is war. And if I do not remain lame I am rather glad than otherwise to be where I am. . . .”

Thus they spoke, and in the words they

uttered each concealed a thought for the other; but for a long time they did not realise this, and when they began to suspect it they were loth to acknowledge it even to themselves. Finally, when their feelings oppressed them so strongly that they could no longer doubt their existence, each one tried to prevent the other from guessing it. . . . It began to be irksome to them to be left thus alone for hours together with no one near. At first they had talked easily together like friends, telling each other of their childhood, and eager, so to speak, to share their childish memories; but now long silences would descend upon them, betraying their secret trouble. Then it occurred to Gertrude to read aloud all the newspapers she could collect, as well as one or two books Dr. Beval lent her; they were for the most part novels of Feuillet's and Halèvy's. In this way they avoided the awkwardness, either of speech or silence. Unfortunately, however harmless these novels were, they nevertheless turned upon the theme of love. Two beings sought or

fled from one another ; imaginary characters suffered or were made happy by love. When she reached these dangerous passages Gertrude would blush up to the roots of her fair hair ; she would stumble over her words, and could not herself understand what she was reading. Benoit, as he listened to her, was conscious of a strange embarrassment, mixed with an unfamiliar sense of happiness, and if Gertrude stopped she could hear in the silence the quickened breathing of the sick man.

Several times in these moments of silence the "manchot" would come suddenly into the room where they were, as though he had been spying on them. He always had some plausible excuse for his intrusion : an order of Joze, who desired the help or advice of Gertrude—some damage which he had discovered in the course of his rounds, and of which he sent word to his daughter—or a letter brought by the messenger, and which Rimsbach was sent in to deliver. When discharging his errands he invariably grinned foolishly, staring at the startled

couple, and saying he was sorry to disturb them. Gertrude would quickly recover her self-command; she evidently had considerable influence over him, for she merely had to give him a brief order and he at once disappeared. But he irritated Benoit: "You see, he spies on us," he would say—"let him wait another three or four days till I can put my foot to the ground! I cannot stand the sight of him. I believe he is a Prussian in disguise, and I should not be in the least surprised if it was he who brought the Uhlans here!"

Gertrude only laughed at him, "'Le manchot' a spy! Why he is much too stupid! and besides father knows all about him. He knows both his father and his mother too." And then she would add, "He would not be such a bad creature if he did not associate with such bad company."

Benoit knew what she alluded to. Rimsbach had the reputation in the village of being always after the girls. He attacked women with the senseless audacity of a half-

wit, and was quite impervious to rebuffs. Without daring to question Gertrude, Benoit guessed that she herself had suffered from his offensive advances, and she must have so snubbed him that he was still smarting from the way she had dealt with him, though he delighted to worry her on account of the intruder whom he suspected of being her lover.

Meanwhile Benoit's convalescence proceeded apace. For him as well as for Gertrude it was a relief when he was able to leave his bed. Taking advantage of the hot days, Gertrude would install him in the garden in front of the house in a long cane chair which she had brought out of her own room. Sitting by him there, she would chat gaily to him, while her hands were busy with some work; or else she would read aloud to him. It made them feel more safe to be out of doors in sight of everybody who passed, and it delivered them from that restless ardent joy which tormented them in the house.

“Yes—how good those days were, sitting

in the shade, with the sun shining in the garden from a cloudless sky, and she who was so good to me sitting by my side—I was really too happy! I wished it might last for ever; I forgot everything else, sir; I even forgot there was war; it was very wrong of me. . . . That young beast Rimsbach's grin warned me that it was so. I ought to have taken my courage in both hands and spoken frankly to Gertrude; but I believe that what prevented me was that I should never have dared confess why I was uneasy. You see, sir, I was a coward, and you always repent that; I have had enough reason to repent it!"

As Benoit was thus reproaching himself the early shade of a late autumn day was creeping over the hospital room. We could hardly see one another as we talked. A nurse came in bringing the wounded man a cup of cocoa and a slice of toast. She uttered a cry of surprise as she came in, "Why! no light . . . were you asleep?" Then turning on the electric light she quickly excused herself with some confusion.



“Ah! M. le Capitaine; I did not know you were still there. . . .”

“Yes,” said I, “we have let the time slip by as we chatted together, and we did not notice that it was taking the daylight with it.”

Smiling and deft, the nurse placed her tray on a little table and left us. Benoit swallowed the contents of the cup, but did not touch the bread, and almost at once resumed the thread of his story. Now that he had got beyond the critical point—the avowal of his intimacy with Gertrude and also of his scruples—his speech flowed more freely.

“At last,” he went on, “as I was now perfectly well and my leg did not get tired when I walked, it was impossible for Gertrude to keep me any longer. I went back to sleep with my men, but I continued to take my meals with the Archers, paying a small sum for my board. What annoyed me was that Rimsbach had his meals with us. He did not grin at me for long, however, for I took him aside one day and

promised him, if he did not mend his manners, such a lesson as would cost him the use of his best arm. 'You are one-armed, I one-legged,' said I, 'so we shall fight on equal terms.' I did not have to repeat what I had said, and he grinned no more. But yet I saw him at noon and at seven o'clock, seated at table between Joze and Gertrude. 'You must not take any notice of him,' she said to me when we were alone, 'I tell you he is just silly, more fool than knave.' But I was not convinced that Rimsbach was so harmless. I felt he hated me, I believed he watched me, and that he would have been delighted to detect the least thing between Gertrude and me. So I too watched him. I could never get rid of the idea that he was a kind of spy, and that led to my observing certain strange facts. When night fell I noticed that, behind the window-blinds of the château, the lights were turned on and off, in one room after another, and on one story after another, and that afterwards the lantern in the tower would be lit up for a considerable

time. Moreover, at other times the tower light would shine and then go out and shine again, for all the world as though signals were being made. I mentioned this to Gertrude; she showed no surprise. 'It is only the "manchot" going his rounds,' she said; 'the baron's orders are that all the rooms of the château are to be visited every evening, and all the electric lamps tested. It seems that is the best way to prevent the lamps deteriorating, and he wishes to find all the lamps in good working order if he should suddenly come here unannounced. . . .'

"This explanation seemed to me plausible, and in any case I now knew that Rimsbach was not doing anything without Joze's knowledge, and that made me feel easier in my mind. But don't you know, sir, how, when suspicion has once got into your head, all objections and explanations, though they may satisfy you for a moment, fail to convince you?

"I did not again speak to Gertrude of the lights in the windows, but I took to watch-

ing them closely. You can guess what was in my head. The signals from the tower could be seen away beyond Fort Ciskey in German Lorraine. Was not this wretch of a Rimsbach taking advantage of the duties he had to discharge in the house to communicate with the frontier outposts of the enemy across the frontier?

“Worried as I was by these suspicions I refrained from mentioning them to Joze Archer. In the first place I could not point to any definite evidence, and in the second I saw that Joze had a certain weakness for Rimsbach, which the latter cultivated with revolting servility.

“He might neglect his duties, leave the house to itself whenever he took it into his head to do so, forget letters in his pocket, and carry out abominably any errands on which he was sent, yet all the punishment he got was a few words of abuse from Joze, which only made him hang his head for a moment.

“I will give you an example. I had noticed that instead of sleeping every night

at the château, as he was supposed to do, he did not hesitate to go off in the middle of the night to visit the woman who guarded a certain level-crossing not far off; but I soon also noticed that these absences were not unknown to Joze Archer, for once, when he was abusing Rimsbach for some forgetfulness, I heard him say, 'Just wait till I go and see, one of these nights, if you know who is alone in her house. . . .' The scrupulous Joze then, who saw everything, knew his Rimsbach. And yet he did not dismiss him, but rather treated him with paternal indulgence. That perplexed me, but did not make me feel more comfortable. I continued to watch this so-called Alsatian. I became certain that he slept out every night, leaving the château to look after itself. He came back before daybreak, that is to say, before the time at which work begins in the country. Twice I was able to be quite certain that he came from the house of the woman in question. A third time he certainly came from somewhere else, because I saw him come out from the

Haume Wood before sunrise, which lies in the opposite direction to that in which the level-crossing lay. But just that same day, Joze, who was in a good humour because news from the front continued to be favourable, chaffed him about a certain Madame Fulgence, who lived with an old husband in a cottage on the Cissey road, at the extreme end of the wood, towards the valley. Thus once more everything was explained.

“I was still hesitating and constructing theories, when at last I obtained clear evidence that there was something wrong. I will tell you how I found this out.

“My superiors at Fort Cissey, particularly the major and the lieutenant who was in command of my section, had not forgotten me during my convalescence. While I was still laid up, they took it in turns to come and see me. When I was better and had gone back to duty, they came more rarely, but still did not leave me to myself in my eyrie at Uffigny. One day the lieutenant—his name was Rabot—rode up on horseback at about eleven in the morning, and dis-

mounted in front of our turret. I was sitting on a bench by the door, waiting for dinner, which Gertrude was to serve at noon. Neither the 'manchot' nor Joze had yet come in. The lieutenant brought me news of the fort. There was still no sign of the enemy, except for a few patrols, who were easy to disperse when they did not surrender immediately they were called upon to do so. They were taking advantage of this respite to improve their armament and construct defensive works in the neighbourhood. The four machine-guns had arrived, and were to be placed next day in the gap in the woods in charge of a section of gunners. They were in a hurry to get this done; a slight set-back had been announced in our offensive in Lorraine, and we must be ready to defend the valley if by ill-luck those devils of Germans succeeded in pushing us back over the frontier. . . . While the lieutenant was speaking, Joze came in with Rimsbach. The lieutenant, who had made his acquaintance on a previous visit, shook him by the hand. At that

moment Gertrude called out from indoors, 'Dinner is ready, father.'

"The lieutenant at once wished to take his leave and ride back, but Joze said to him, 'Sir, I am perhaps presuming in inviting you, but will you give an old soldier of 1870 the honour and pleasure of sharing our soup with us?'

"The lieutenant, who was a very nice, simple fellow, hesitated a moment, but at that instant Gertrude, who was getting impatient, came out, and I think the sight of her pretty face and fair hair made him decide to accept. After all, he was about the same age as myself.

"Dinner was as usual abundant and good. Gertrude, with the help of her little maid, did all the household work admirably. There was a succulent stew, washed down with excellent wine, a Cisey cheese, and peaches, quantities of which grew in the garden, though now the masters of the château were not there to enjoy them. Afterwards there was coffee, followed by an old liqueur served in long glasses; then



Gertrude went away and left the men to smoke. Joze and I listened with intense interest to the stories the lieutenant told us of the work they were doing to strengthen the entrenched camp round Cissey. After a while, Rabot asked Joze about the other war, the war of defeat, and it was wonderful how clearly Joze explained the engagements in which he had taken part, and how exactly he remembered details concerning the work of the artillery, which was his arm; evidently when he had reverted to civil life he had not lost his love for his profession of a soldier. While he and the lieutenant talked, I, with my short experience as quartermaster, could naturally only listen in silence. But what annoyed me was to see Rimsbach there with his great owlish eyes, drinking in every word he heard, particularly since the conversation furnished excellent material for a spy; for example, the news that the four quick-firing guns would be placed in position in the Haume Wood by the next day, and the details of the preparations by means of which it was hoped to bar access

to the valley, even if the fort was taken or masked by the enemy. The lieutenant talked too much; the wine and the old liqueur excited him, and, besides, he had a right to think he was among friends! How was I to stop him? how warn him?

“I was much relieved when, questioned in my turn, I had to tell all about the long stay I had made in Saxony, in a farm school, before I did my military service. Of all the Huns, the Saxons are perhaps the least brutal, and yet the weight of that sham German civilisation very soon became intolerable to me. I said what I thought of the Germans, that they were certainly a great people, but had none of the qualities of a great people like the English and French. I watched Rimsbach as I said that, and he seemed to me ill at ease. Joze and the lieutenant approved what I said.

“About two o'clock the lieutenant had his horse brought round and started back for the fort. Joze left for Gourdenange, and Rimsbach went into the house. I

stayed on a quarter of an hour with Gertrude before going back to the telephone station. Now that mobilisation was complete, I had had hardly any calls to deal with for some days past, and although the wireless apparatus was in working order, my corporal would have been able to deal with the work alone; moreover, he knew where to find me if I was wanted. Thus I could have spent the whole afternoon with her. But as I have already said, when we were alone together we were at the same time happy and wretched. And so, after a few minutes we each went off to our work . . . and immediately we had done so we were each seized, as it were, with remorse; we each missed the presence of the other, and each of us was vexed at having cut short the joy of being together; but it was then too late.

“That evening Joze did not come back from Gourdenange in time for dinner; I therefore had to sit—as I fairly often had to do—between Gertrude and Rimsbach. When this was the case, we hurried through

our meal as quickly as we could; the 'manchot,' who always had a rendezvous somewhere, disappeared as soon as he could, on the pretext of having to go his rounds in the château. Gertrude and I went out to sit on the bench by the door, and, as the shadows of night fell about us, they gave us courage to stay together.

“I can remember how that evening—it was the 16th August—no one came to disturb us. The weather was wonderful—so wonderful that—well, I cannot describe it. Happiness—a happiness which was too great seemed to come down to us from the sky, in which we watched the last rays of daylight and the first glimmer of the stars. Gertrude's hand was in mine; after a while I felt it tremble, and, raising my eyes to hers, I saw that they were full of tears. I could not avoid asking her what troubled her. After some time she confessed that the lieutenant's talk at dinner had filled her with apprehension. He had said to me, in the course of his explanations about the function of Fort Cissey in the campaign

which was developing, 'If, as I hope, our progress in Lorraine continues, we shall not kick our heels much longer here; and you, my friend, will have to transport your wires and your dynamo to Metz.' Gertrude had been pondering over what he had said all the afternoon as she sat sewing or doing her household work, and now, as we both tasted the deep joy of being together, she was saddened by the thought of how precarious that joy was. I did my best to comfort her. I told her that as a telephonist I did not incur any great risks, which was not absolutely true, for as soon as a telephone station has been spotted, it is at once a target for the enemy's artillery. I begged her to be brave, so as to help me to be so if I had to go. 'I am a wretched coward,' she answered. 'I can only hope that you will remain out of reach of the enemy throughout the war. Have you not already paid your debt to your country? You are probably the first man to be wounded in the war!' She was sobbing. I put her head on my shoulder, and we remained thus

in silence, long enough for night to grow quite dark about us. Gradually the last sounds in the village died away; but Gertrude, though she had now grown calmer, continued to rest her head upon my shoulder.

“A sound of footsteps crunching the gravel at some distance from us, in the direction of the main building, made her sit up and move a little way away from me. We both listened. The steps came nearer for a moment, and then their sound died away; the silence became so complete that we could distinctly hear a door in the wall surrounding the park, which was at a distance of at least two hundred yards from where we sat, open and shut again.

“‘That must be Rimsbach going off on one of his escapades,’ whispered Gertrude. ‘He now never passes a night at the château when he knows that father is away.’

“I did not answer. I was vexed with myself for not having watched the lights of the tower that evening, as I had made up my mind to do. I became convinced

that Rimsbach, full of the information unwarily let out that morning by the lieutenant, had, immediately night fell, made signals to the enemy, and no doubt arranged a meeting, whither he was now bound, ready primed with the usual pretext, in case he should be questioned, of a tryst with one of his fair friends. I thought a moment as to whether I should tell my suspicion to Gertrude, or go at once in pursuit of the boy. Fear of frightening her made me hold my tongue, and while I was hesitating, time passed by, until finally I came to the conclusion that it was too late.

“‘Now it is time to go in,’ said Gertrude, getting up. ‘Good-night, Benoit.’”

“We shook hands. She went off towards the turret where she lived, and, going in, shut the door behind her. I could hear her putting up the iron bar across the shutters. I lit a cigarette and stayed on, sitting on the bench and thinking.”

## V

“I HAVE often read, sir, in novels, how some people are able, so to speak, to separate themselves into two, and allow one of their halves to watch the other act and think. I am much too simple to have any experience of so subtle a condition, but what does sometimes happen to me is, without in the least dividing myself into two, to think of two things at the same time and to think hard of both. I can only liken it to the bass and treble of a piano ; each part develops without hurting the other, and both together form a harmonious whole.

“Well, that evening the bass of my thoughts was : ‘ Gertrude is in there, in that very house. I love her, my whole life belongs to her ; I have never told her so, but she knows it. . . . ’ Furthermore, the



bass of my thoughts consisted of memories of a moment earlier, or of the evening before—the colour of her hair, the look in her eyes when she let them dwell on mine longer than usual, the pressure of her fingers—her tears a little time before. . . .

“All this played a deep grave accompaniment in my head, while, very distinctly, my mind was also busy thinking of Rimsbach, of the lights in the windows, of the little door in the park enclosure which had been opened and shut so carefully. Gradually this evil refrain came to predominate over the other. I turned over in my mind so often everything I could remember which fed my suspicions of the spy, that finally—I hardly know how—the exquisite thought that Gertrude was there near me, and that she and I were of one mind, faded into the background, and the jarring of the treble prevented me from enjoying it.

“Usually, on fine evenings like that, when Gertrude had gone into her room and shut up the house, I stayed on alone on the bench until she put out her lamp, and the

thin thread of light between the shutters disappeared. But that evening the light went out without my noticing it, and it was only when I looked up that I saw that the whole house was dark. The clock on the town hall struck half-past ten. I got up mechanically, passed out through the door in the wall surrounding the park, and, when I had reached the road, took the path which led across a piece of fallow land and made for the Haume Wood.

“Even in the open fields the night was pretty dark. In the woods any one who did not know every path would have lost his way. But I was familiar with every inch of it, and ran no risk of losing myself between Uffigny and the road through the valley.

“I myself hardly knew, sir, where I was going. A kind of instinct guided me in the direction which Rimsbach must necessarily have taken to go from the château to the cottage of his new acquaintance. My object was to spy upon the spy. I now walked with a lighter, easier step; I had to

make a certain amount of effort, for though I walked without fatigue, my right leg still moved stiffly and hindered my progress. My first reconnaissance convinced me that nothing of a suspicious nature was happening at the easterly horn of the wood which jutted out towards Uffigny. If the 'manchot' had a rendezvous, it must be farther on, either on the wooded plateau or on the slopes near Cissey. But as one gets farther away from Uffigny the wood spreads out, and ultimately becomes more than two miles wide. Even if Rimsbach had appointed that very hour and the wood of Uffigny for his rendezvous, I had very little chance of finding him. Nevertheless I went straight on, as silently and regularly as a dog following a scent. At one point I made a detour to avoid a group of charcoal-burners' huts which stood near the path; then I got back on to the path and did not leave it again. As I plunged deeper in among the beech and birch trees, and left the fringe of the wood farther and farther behind me, a kind of strange eagerness took

possession of me and guided my actions while it dulled my thoughts. I was incapable of reflection; and yet I found my way infallibly, taking every precaution necessary to avoid being heard. Indeed, the noiselessness with which I moved forward surprised me as much as did the feeling of certainty with which I knew my way.

“Suddenly a thought struck me which made me come to a stop: I had not got my revolver on me. I had left it in my room in the turret, for I never took it with me when I went to dine with Gertrude. . . . Should I go back and fetch it? That would no doubt have been the wisest course, but I at once decided not to. It seemed to me that if I put off my pursuit—if it were only for a quarter of an hour—I should lose the scent. ‘It does not matter,’ I thought, ‘I have got a good knife. . . .’ It was a hunting knife which could be fixed open. I felt for it under my coat and went on again.

“I had hardly started again, when I stumbled over a hard object. There are

very few loose stones on these forest tracks, on which you walk as softly as on a carpet. I bent down and picked up a kind of flat oblong case that I immediately recognised, in spite of the almost complete darkness, just by feeling it. It was a portable electric lamp which I had often seen in Rimsbach's hands. Of course I did not turn on the light, but I put it in my pocket with a feeling of satisfaction. He had passed by there and the scent was good.

“ Ask anybody you like, sir, even country-folk, with the possible exception of poachers and charcoal-burners, and you will see how few there are who like being in the woods at night. No one likes being there after dark; and those who are kept there after sundown by their occupation or by sport do not stay there for pleasure. No doubt there is something in the thick undergrowth which closes you in all round as by a wall, and in the ceiling which the trees stretch between you and the sky, which seems to duplicate the darkness of the night and make the solitude more oppressive. If you

are a coward, you will shake and tremble, and feel you are surrounded by uncanny dangers; for you are deprived of the aid of your eyes, which tell you of coming danger, and your voice is powerless to summon help. If you are not a coward, you concentrate all your energy in an attitude of silent defence, which strengthens the keenness of your hearing and the alertness of your muscles. I had pulled out my knife, and though I did not yet open it, I grasped it firmly in my right hand. Now and then I stopped to listen. Generally there was not a sound to be heard. Once or twice I was under the illusion that I heard voices speaking in the distance . . . but they seemed to fade away the more I tried to listen to them. . . . Then suddenly those same voices—yes, I was quite certain they were the same—spoke so near me that I stood rooted to the spot, hardly daring to put down my foot which was raised in the act of stepping forward. . . . Yes, quite near, perhaps at a distance of thirty yards from where I stood, but

separated from me by a fairly dense thicket, which deadened the sound of their words like a mattress placed between me and them, preventing me from hearing what they said ; I could only catch the alternation of their voices. I threw myself on the ground and, like a fox or a weasel on the hunt, quitted the pathway and crawled down the slope in the direction from which they came. I ran no risk of losing my way, for the voices attempted no concealment. They did not shout, but spoke in an ordinary tone—that slightly low tone which darkness and the forest naturally impose on the most talkative. And as the speakers hardly ceased speaking (there were certainly two of them, neither more nor less) I was able to continue on my way without any risk of being heard ; they made more noise talking than I did as I crept along.”

## VI

CASTAIN paused a moment and then continued: "I crawled on; stopped, and listened; but I was not yet near enough. I crept still nearer. The two men were quietly sitting talking and did not budge. At last a few words reached me clearly — 'zu spät . . . widerholen . . . Festung . . .'<sup>1</sup>

"There was nothing as yet to be deduced from the fact that they spoke German, since in the frontier regions it is not rare to hear German spoken. Yet my heart was beating fast, for I now seemed to be within reach of discovering what had been puzzling me for so long. Still nearer I crawled, so as to be able to hear better, and then, lying flat on the ground with my chin in my hands, I listened with all my might. The

<sup>1</sup> "Too late . . . repeat . . . Fort."



voices continued to speak, and now I did not miss a word of what they said. I knew German well enough to recognise that one of the speakers was an educated man, and the other . . . well, a plain man like myself. But neither of them used a title in addressing the other, which between Boches is sufficiently rare to be worthy of remark. For about three-quarters of an hour I lay closely hidden in my thicket, and listening to these two men talking at about a dozen yards from me; that is to say, I lay there with my chin in my hands for about three-quarters of an hour; the two men did not keep on quietly talking for half so long. I tried in vain to see them, but the bushes that separated us intensified the darkness of the night. I imagined that they were sitting side by side on a tree trunk which was lying alongside the path, with their backs towards me. One of them was smoking a pipe; he often kept it between his lips while he spoke, only taking it out when he became excited. When he put it back again he would suck it noisily. He

was the one who spoke like a gentleman. At first they only talked of insignificant things, or at least of things that seemed insignificant to me because I could not understand to what their words referred. They mentioned a certain 'Herta,' who evidently lived in the neighbourhood. The man with the pipe thought her stupid and careless; the other one defended her by saying that she was reliable and trustworthy. The man with the pipe then observed that it was getting late, and that it was extraordinary that they should have to wait so long; but he did not specify what they were waiting for. 'Er kommt sicher,' the other answered, which, as you know, means 'He will soon be here' or 'He will certainly come.' This single sentence made me tremble with excitement. 'He' must be Rimsbach, without any doubt. I crawled still nearer, so as to hear better what they would say about him, but they did not pursue the subject; they began to talk about the 'office,' the office to which they were both evidently attached, and

the difficulties they had in corresponding with this office. As they were saying this they instinctively lowered their voices, and it became extremely difficult for me to catch what they said. They soon resumed their natural tone again when they began to talk about the war just like any two ordinary people; but then, though they talked without heat, the quiet way in which they spoke of the German advance through Belgium, and foretold the fall of Verdun, left me no doubt that they were Boches.

“‘Achtung,’ said the man with the pipe, suddenly. They immediately stopped talking. As I had my ears near the ground, I could distinguish the sound of approaching footsteps. Was it their accomplice Rimsbach? Oh, how I had to restrain myself not to jump out from my hiding-place and stab him there and then with my knife! But I could not take any risks. At all costs I must hear the conversation between the three spies. Then I heard a voice from a little distance call out clearly, but not loudly, ‘Hullo,’ and the man with

the pipe answered 'Hullo.' And then, without my moving an inch, something extraordinary happened, something which had never happened to me before. . . . As soon as ever I heard those two calls, and without my realising what was taking place, I felt so intensely queer that if I had not already been on the ground, I should certainly have fallen down. My ears buzzed, my temples became moist, burning hot and then icy cold ; I was bathed in perspiration, and could not open my mouth ; in fact, for the first time in my life, and I expect for the last, I fainted away without any shock or wound having been the cause of my doing so.

“ I cannot have lost consciousness for very long, probably for not more than a minute ; but I was slow to regain the use of my senses. When I came to myself I did not at first understand what I was doing there, lying on the ground in the darkness ; I listened absently to the voices talking quite near, and it seemed as though everything had suddenly become unfamiliar except

some catastrophe which had happened to me, and after depriving me of my senses had left me shattered and desperate. Strange to say I could not remember what this catastrophe was, or what had brought it about. For a good while I listened to the voices, and although I understood what they said I was perfectly indifferent. Little by little the kind of mist which hung over my mind dispersed; my brain cleared and I became Quartermaster Castain again, engaged in watching three spies. At the same time I understood why my instinct, quicker and surer than any process of the reason, had struck me to the heart and left me unconscious. The third voice now talking was not Rimsbach's. It belonged to Joze Archer.

“Now that I grasped with my reason and not merely with my instinct what consequences this discovery would have on my own life, I once more felt the blood throb in my temples. But this time I was able to pull myself together. At all costs I must know what was happening. It was

no longer the moment for me to faint like a young girl. But as I am making a clean breast of it to you, sir, I may as well own that while I was doing all I could not to lose a word of the conversation of the three spies, I felt large tears running down my cheeks on to my moustache and hands. Even to-day I could still write down every word those men spoke. The man with the pipe and Joze did most of the talking, the other one hardly intervening at all in the conversation. They spoke German; Joze very fluently, though with somewhat of an accent.

“‘You must cut some branches down off the top of one of your poplars,’ said the man with the pipe, ‘we cannot see the lights clearly enough, or else you must make your signals from higher up.’

“‘I could not make them from higher up,’ replied Joze, ‘for I already make them from the top story of the tower. But I will find some good reason for cutting the tree down. I thought it was in the way. It began to shoot up this summer.’

“ ‘Very good,’ replied the other roughly, ‘now tell me about your lunch.’

“ ‘Well,’ began Joze, ‘Lieutenant Rabot commands the 2nd section of the 6th Battery at Fort Cissey. In the course of our conversation he gave me the number of troops at Cissey, both of those who are there now and of those who are expected. I noted them down, immediately he left, on the paper I gave you just now.’

“ ‘We had already got them.’

“ ‘Perhaps your figures were not so complete; anyhow mine will serve as a check. Then the lieutenant talked about his superior officers. Captain Ulrich of the 6th Battery is brave and a good horseman but a muddler. Major de Boissac, who is in command of the heavy artillery, is a very able man and very popular with his men. As to Colonel Meritz, the lieutenant admitted to me that he was what the French Lorrainers call “une baderne” (an old woman).’

“ ‘Everybody agrees about that,’ said the man with the pipe; ‘but he will never be moved, he has too much influence behind

him—there is nothing very interesting in all that ;—now tell me about the machine-guns.’

“ ‘ I have the most accurate information about them,’ replied Joze, ‘ the four that are intended for the Haume Wood have arrived, with a big supply of ammunition, and will be placed in position to-morrow. Major de Boissac firmly believes that with them he would be able to prevent any infantry attack from debouching along the winding road which goes up through the wood to Uffigny.’

“ ‘ Wahrscheinlich,’ said the man with the pipe, after thinking a while ; ‘ but the major forgets that with a couple of 105 shells at the outside, his four little coffee-mills can all be blown to “ kingdom come.” Where exactly is this Haume Wood position ?’

“ ‘ On slope 326,’ said the second spy—the man who was not smoking and who did not seem to me to be a gentleman. ‘ I marked it down the very first day after mobilisation. You could then get as near to it as you liked. I played a hand of cards



with the territorial they had shoved in there, and who did not even know what he was mounting guard there for !’

“ ‘ And now ? ’ asked the chief.

“ ‘ Oh, now they have a company there, and you can’t get near any more.’

“ ‘ But you are quite sure it is located ? ’

“ ‘ Certainly I am, unless the position has been changed.’

“ Then Joze said, ‘ Oh, I can go there. I will ask the little quartermaster to take me.’

“ ‘ And if he refuses ? ’

“ ‘ He will do anything I ask him.’

“ ‘ Good.’

“ The others were not curious to know why the little quartermaster was willing to do all that Joze asked him, and Joze did not tell them, but I knew what was in his mind. And you cannot imagine, sir, how it made me suffer . . . that Joze Archer was a spy was already a terrible thing for me ; but what about her who lived with him, whom he seemed to love sincerely and who certainly loved him ? Could I really believe that she knew nothing of what her father did ?

Supposing she was his associate, then she too had been fooling me ; perhaps she had been used as a decoy for the 'little quartermaster' !

“The three men had now ceased to talk about me and returned to the subject of ‘the office.’ Then they arranged a meeting-place for two days later when Joze Archer would have been to see the group of quick-firing guns. But I began to think about what the two Germans had said before Joze had come on to the scene. Who could this Herta be they had been talking about ? Herta or Gerta is, in Germany, the short for Gertrude. Oh, mon capitaine, imagine what I felt when, convinced as I was of the horrible truth that the father of my darling was a scoundrel who had sold himself to the Boches, I was now compelled to suspect that she herself . . . I had to bite into the very moss on the ground not to scream and sob aloud.

“For some time the three men did not speak, and I heard nothing but the sound which their chief made sucking at his pipe.

I noticed that the darkness had gradually become less opaque, though the dawn was still a long way off. It was not yet midnight, but there are some summer nights when there is a faint glimmer in the sky long before you are able to tell whether it comes from below the horizon or from the starry sky. The spies no doubt felt this too; for after exchanging a few words in a tone so low that I could not understand them, they got up and without shaking each other's hands, or, as it seemed to me, saying a word, separated in their different directions. The steps of the two strangers died away towards Cisse. Joze remaining alone, lit a cigarette and then started off, not in the direction in which he had come, but towards the footpath that I had myself followed. He did not appear to make any attempt to deaden the sound of his footsteps, or to try and prevent himself from being seen. After all, what had he to fear? Everybody was accustomed to see him on his rounds early and late, and no one would think it strange if he met him abroad at this hour.

“ In the meantime I had crawled towards the road through the same opening by which I had come, doing all I could to avoid being heard ; I was sure to get there before he did, and in fact, crouching in the fringe of the thicket, I saw him pass quietly some five paces from me, the glowing tip of his cigarette lighting up his moustache and part of his nose. It was then that I really realised where my duty lay ; that is nothing to be proud of, I know, and I also know what I should have been if I had hesitated to do it. But I did not hesitate, sir, and at that moment neither Joze nor his daughter existed for me. I just said to myself ‘ he is a spy and you are a soldier, it is your duty to arrest him.’

“ I was, as you may imagine, stronger than Joze ; but he was sturdy still for all his sixty years, and it would not do to allow him to escape. On the other hand, I felt reluctant to fight him and wound him. These thoughts passed quickly through my mind though without flurry. I did not risk anything by biding my time, so I followed my

man at a distance of about thirty yards, and as he suspected nothing, even if he gained on me, he could not escape me. I began by taking off my putties; they were made of good strong cloth and were bound round my legs over my trousers. I intended to use them to gag and tie up the spy as soon as I had got him down. Moreover, I had a blue belt. To get him down I made use of a trick I had learnt in my regiment from a comrade who in peace time had prowled about the region between La Villette and Saint Denis, a fellow who was not worth much, but who knew all the tricks of the night-birds. He told me that this particular one was much recommended when you want to get your man neatly without damaging him. You come quietly up behind him till you are practically treading on his heels, and then you cough loudly. Your victim never turns right round, which would make him dangerous, but he looks half round, thereby depriving himself of all capacity for self-defence, and he is, moreover, startled; you then jab him with your head

in the wind and down he goes. The trick came off; it always does, and in spite of our disproportionate strength, Joze would have got the better of me in the same way had our situations been reversed. The blow I gave him in the stomach had so taken his wind that I had plenty of leisure to tie his wrists together before he had time to get his breath again. I did not even give myself the trouble of trying to tie his feet together. I knew I could run three times as fast as he, even after my wound, and I did not care to have to carry him.

## VII

“WHEN he recovered consciousness he found himself sitting on the ground with his back against the bank of the forest path. He began to mutter in German. As he had had a severe fright and a big shock afterwards, he did not at once recognise me, though we were near enough to see each other's face. I told you that the night was getting lighter. When I saw that he had quite regained consciousness, and was looking at me and realising that it was I who had knocked him down and bound his wrists together, I can tell you that I felt pretty bad. The gaze in those staring frightened puzzled eyes, which were so different from the eyes that I knew, though the face they looked out from was the same honest face of Père Joze—that

gaze made me feel weak all over; if he had humbled himself before me at that moment I dare not think what I should have done. Luckily he did not realise that, and instead of being humble, talked roughly to me.

“ ‘Are you off your head?’ he asked, ‘or is this a silly joke?’

“ His words angered me, but I restrained myself as best I could and tried to speak quietly. ‘It is no use taking that tone,’ I said, ‘you are caught, and if you were to try to escape I should catch you in twenty yards, and then I should tie you up with this (and I showed him my blue belt) so tightly that you could not move a finger!’

“ He did not reply, but I read in his face the thoughts that were passing through his mind. He was comparing his strength with mine, and making up his mind not to attempt to fight. Then he tried to guess what I knew of his movements and of his profession of spy; he decided not to confess anything of his own accord, but only to acknowledge grudgingly what he could not deny.



“‘I do not know what you mean,’ he grumbled out; ‘somebody has been telling you stories against me, and you have exaggerated them. All the same I should not have expected this from you after having taken you into my house and looked after you as though you were my own child.’

“‘This time his thrust went home. I thought of the room in the turret where Gertrude had tended me, and where Joze himself had often come in to chat by my bedside. I felt hopelessly entangled, and it seemed to me that anybody in the world but myself would have had a right to arrest and give up Joze. As I did not speak, he went on in the same tone, for he understood what troubled me and was determined to take advantage of it.

“‘Well, you can have me shot if you like. It will be easy enough now for the French think that everybody they see is a spy.’

“‘Then he tried to get up, but I forced him back. One word that escaped him had

struck me like a blow and renewed my courage. He had said 'the French' like a true Boche, and by that he showed himself to be a Boche at heart.

"'Keep still,' I answered, 'and reply to my questions'; 'I do not yet know what I shall do with you. But I intend to prevent your doing any harm. We will see later what to do. Tell me now who were those two men with whom you were talking just now.'

"'Which men? I was coming back alone.'

"'Do not pretend not to know—the two Germans with whom you were talking barely half an hour ago; one of them was smoking a pipe.'

"He would not let himself be drawn, but kept his mouth shut so as to force me to say more, and show him how much I knew. His tactics were successful, for I was the first to lose patience.

"'They were both waiting for you about twenty yards away from here,' I said, 'near the first path on the left which goes

down towards the valley. One of them is the chief spy, perhaps an officer; the other an ordinary agent. You had arranged to meet them this evening by signalling with the light from the tower at Uffigny, for it is you and not Rimsbach who works the lamps of the château, unless Rimsbach is your accomplice . . . and so you came here to meet them; you gave them a paper containing a summary of the talk we had this morning with Lieutenant Rabot at your house, at your table, you low cur; and then you offered to reconnoitre the spot where the new machine-guns are to be placed. You counted on my confiding stupidity to take you there. . . . Thus you see I know all about it, so you had better answer my questions. I want to know who those two Boches were. If you refuse to answer me I will truss you up from head to foot, and you will be unable to untie yourself till a guard of honour comes for you from Uffigny! Now talk. . . .’

“The glimmer of dawn, which in the warm

months of the year begins so long before the sun actually rises, was growing stronger. I could now see Joze's face quite clearly, and I noticed that twice his lips moved without making a sound. Then he managed to speak :

“‘And supposing I answer, what will you do?’

“It was now my turn to be silent. If fear made him give way, and if he consented to tell me all his secrets, what could I do with him? Was I to give him up all the same? Then what was the good of questioning him? I already knew enough to justify me in arresting him and handing him over to my superiors. . . .

“‘Speak first,’ I said, ‘then we will see.’

“He shook his head.

“‘Take me to Uffigny; hand me over to the mayor. I do not care whether I am shot or no.’

“He was watching my face, and had not much difficulty in seeing that I was not capable of treating him like an ordinary spy. He did not fear to tell me so, and

with that honest everyday face of his, the blackguard said to me :

“‘Do not make yourself out worse than you are, Benoit; you are incapable of giving up a man who has sheltered you and cared for you. And it is not only for my sake that you will not do it. You will not do it because of Gertrude, for if you did it would be as though you thrust your bayonet through her heart. Ah, you see you are not so bad as you want to make out.’

“‘To hear him speak of Gertrude upset me so much that as I stood there with my prisoner at my feet I put my hands up before my face, and could hardly restrain myself from sobbing. He lost no time in pursuing his advantage.

“‘Untie my hands and let me go,’ he said. ‘I promise you that within eight days I shall have left the country and crossed the frontier. . . . I only want time to get ready to go without raising suspicions in Uffigny or giving the alarm to Gertrude.’

“‘Oh, mon capitaine, how sly he was. I

have realised that since. By talking to me as he did he had succeeded in changing the current of my thoughts, and now it was Gertrude who filled my mind! I could not help saying: 'Then she knows nothing?'

"Gertrude? why, she would not stay in the same house with me a single minute if she knew!'

"Those are the very words he used, sir; but they were enough, for they meant that he knew he was so vile that even his own daughter would kill herself if she knew what her father was. And just because of the very impudence of his words they sounded true. I believed them at once, and was absolutely convinced that Gertrude knew nothing. Then suddenly everything took on a new aspect. The world which had been, as it were, darkened from the moment when I recognised Joze's voice, became light again. I felt it once more possible to live, and the hopeless tangle in which I felt I was caught seemed to straighten itself out.

"Listen to me,' I said to Joze, 'for

Gertrude's sake I will not give you up. But wait a moment; do not imagine that you are going to get out of it so easily as all that. In the first place, if I save you from a court-martial, you must answer the questions I put to you. I mean to know exactly who you are, on whose account you work, and for how long you have been doing it. When you have told me all that, we will return to Uffigny together, and to-morrow morning you can go about as usual during the morning. You will lunch at home. I shall not have the heart to sit between you and Gertrude, and shall find some excuse for not being there. I warn you not to try and escape during lunch, for you will be watched. At one o'clock I shall come for you; we will go out together through the grounds and make for Gourdenange and the frontier of Luxemburg. I shall see that you cross it, and then you may go to . . . the devil . . . but mind that you never show your face here again. If ever you reappear, I shall have you arrested, even if I am arrested too.'

“He thought a moment and then said, ‘And what about Gertrude?’

“‘For all she will know, you will have disappeared—died, perhaps,’ I answered.

“‘What will become of her?’

“‘I will take charge of her.’

“This time he did not answer, but a little later I saw that he bent his head and tears were running down his wrinkled cheeks. You see, *mon capitaine*, one man never entirely understands another. Here was a man who was the most despicable kind of spy, capable of betraying the people among whom he had lived for eight years, and of making use of his daughter to gain the confidence of a soldier; and yet, vile creature as he was, he was not utterly insensible. When he saw that he would have to separate from his child, he was really shaken. But he soon pulled himself together again. No doubt he was thinking out some plan in his head. The most urgent thing for him was to save his skin; he was probably calculating that later on he would be able to find means to communicate with



his daughter and send for her to come to him.

“‘Well, I agree,’ he said. ‘Ask me what you want to know and I will answer you.’

“‘The truth?’

“‘Certainly.’

“‘How can I be sure of that?’

“‘Why should I lie? With what you know already, everything will be found out sooner or later. Besides, it is the fault of those two idiots for not arranging a better place for their meetings. I told them that Uffigny Wood was not a good place, but they were so convinced that the French hear and see nothing. . . .’

“‘Who are they both?’

“‘They belong to the Intelligence Department of the sub-district of Busshofen. You have rightly guessed that one of them is the chief. He is an old Kreisdirektor who has taken to spying, for which he gets better pay—Herr Kafke by name. His companion is an ordinary inspector, called Tiefing. Won’t you untie my hands?—they hurt me.

You need not be afraid, you are stronger than me.'

“ ‘Wait a little ; perhaps I will presently. . . . Herr Kafke. . . . Inspector Tiefing . . . Good. . . . What are they supposed to do?’

“ ‘They are in charge of the whole frontier region round Busshofen, in France, in Luxemburg, and in the annexed part of Lorraine, where the spirit of the population is anti-German.’

“The word ‘Luxemburg’ immediately put a new idea into my head.

“ ‘I suppose,’ I said, ‘that it was you who arranged that affair with the Uhlans at Uffigny?’

“As though anxious to convince me that he was no longer trying to deceive me, he replied without a shadow of hesitation :

“ ‘Of course.’

“All kinds of things now came back to my mind in which I could see Joze’s hand, and as he seemed to be ready to tell the truth, I continued to question him.

“ ‘Rimsbach is your accomplice, isn’t he?’

“ ‘ Rimsbach ? You’re joking.’

“ ‘ Not at all, I am sure of what I am saying ; I caught him in the act of making signals.’

“ ‘ You made a mistake. Rimsbach is a little idiot who only thinks about girls, and I should have had a pretty accomplice in him. I have never allowed him to climb up into the tower at Uffigny.’

“ ‘ Once more Joze’s words sounded ‘ true.’ And it was quite true that Rimsbach was too stupid for a spy. I had only been led to suspect him by my absolute confidence in Joze, and because I could not bear the sight of him. I went on with my examination.

“ ‘ And your masters, the Somski—they are spies too, aren’t they ? They are Germans in disguise.’

“ ‘ This time he did not answer at once. Then he said :

“ ‘ I do not know.’

“ ‘ Oh, I understand ; you have some scruples left even though you are a spy, and now you do not know which side to betray.’

“ He lifted up his head and I saw revolt in his eyes.

“ ‘ Why do you insult me ? It is cowardly, . . . you are younger and stronger than I am ; you attacked me from behind and tied my hands together. You have nothing to be proud of. And now I’m down, it’s cowardly to insult me.’

“ ‘ I do not insult you when I call your trade by its name. I should like to know what a spy is, if you are not one.’

“ ‘ And will you kindly tell me what you were doing, watching and listening here in the woods at night ? Don’t you call that spying ? Upon my word, it seems to me that you have all the makings of a spy ; and you did it for the love of the thing too.’

“ But that stung me.

“ ‘ There is some difference between you and me, all the same,’ I said. ‘ I have done my duty as a soldier, what is laid down for us in our manuals—the duty to use every means to prevent the enemy from obtaining information of a military nature ; while you have been spying on your own people, on

the country that bore you, and fed you and whose uniform you have worn, you skunk !’

“He shrugged his shoulders and said quietly :

“‘ You fool ! I am not a Frenchman.’

“It did not strike me for a moment how astonishing this admission was. To me, who had never doubted of his nationality, he had given his secret away spontaneously and gratuitously. Why had he done so ? I have thought it over since, and I am convinced that he gave way at that moment to the desire to justify his conduct, to try not to appear more abject than he really was. I did not attempt to conceal my surprise.

“‘ Not French ?’ I said.

“‘ Not more so than you are a subject of the Emperor ! So you see we are doing the same thing, you and I. We each serve our country.’

“I did not point out the difference (though I felt it) between dissimulating every hour of the day and deceiving honest folk who had trusted you for years, and keeping

watch, as I had done, for a single night on a spy. But I was taken too much by surprise. . . . Joseph Archer and the Somski Germans ! So the big German spider had been weaving his web at Uffigny for at least eight years. In how many similar spots in the neighbourhood of the frontier had not other webs been woven ? For the first time I began to realise the formidable nature of the German spy system.

“Then I said, ‘So all you told us—all those stories about the war of 1870, your campaigns and your wounded arm, were lies?’

“‘I did take part in the war of ’70, in the 3rd Lancers of the Grand Duchy of Baden,’ replied Joze. ‘It is true that I was wounded in the left arm, quite at the end of the campaign, when we were in pursuit of the army of Bourbaki, but it was a chassepot bullet which broke my elbow.’

“‘But where did you get your identification papers from that you showed me?’

“‘If you knew the history of those times

better you would know that we could pick up French soldiers' papers by the shovelful during your retreat from Pontarlier.'

" 'So even then, while you were still fighting, you thought of spying?'

" 'No; I was given those papers later when I joined the military police.'

" 'And what is your real name?' I asked.

" 'What is that to you?'

" 'I was too anxious to find out something else to press him on that subject, and could not refrain from asking :

" 'And Gertrude?'

" 'I have told you that Gertrude knows nothing. She was born twenty-three years after the war, and I had then been Joseph Archer for twenty-six years; like her mother, who came from French Switzerland, she has never known anybody but Joseph Archer, whose name is properly registered as that of her father in the registers at Grabitz, where she was born. There, I have told you everything now. Let us get back to Uffigny; but first untie my hands—I tell

you you tied those putties too tightly ; they are hurting me.'

"I did not budge ; I was racking my brain to find out what further questions I could put to him, but I could think of none, my mind was absolutely empty, but I managed to say :

" ' Before I untie you I want you to tell me what the Germans intend to do at Ciskey. Are they going to try and storm our works there ?'

" ' I know nothing about that.'

" ' Do not try and fool me ; you must know.'

" ' I do not ; my district is Uffigny, the grounds of the château, and the adjoining lands as far as the Luxemburg frontier, including the Haume Wood. Each of us has his district. Probably the Germans will try and take Ciskey Pass. But if you want my opinion, they will be in Paris before they are at Uffigny.'

"I did not then understand what he meant. I thought he was alluding to the difficulty the Germans would have in taking Ciskey.



Now I know that he meant something quite different, and that he was alluding to the coming advance of the Germans on Paris, of which he already knew, and which we were far from foreseeing.

“‘Come, untie my hands now,’ he repeated.

“The calm way in which he said that struck me. Evidently I was a mere child in comparison with an old hand like Joze Archer (I call him that because I do not know his real name, but one hates to give a Boche spy the name of a poor French soldier killed by the Germans). And yet, though I was as artless as a child, he was not careful enough, and the contrast of his tone now with his tears of a moment before shocked me. While I pretended to begin untying his hands, I asked him :

“‘You quite understand that we return to Uffigny together.’

“‘Yes.’

“‘That you will have the morning in which to get ready to go. I shall not let you out of my sight for a moment ; and as

soon as you have eaten your midday meal, we will leave together through the park for Gourdenange.'

"He shrugged his shoulders: 'Yes, yes; I understand all that.'

"'I shall see that you cross the frontier, and if ever I see you again I shall have you arrested.'

"'Of course, of course; you don't think I shall be such a fool as to come back, do you? Untie my hands now, and I will go with you.'

"I know, *mon capitaine*, that you are saying to yourself, 'Was Castain really such a fool as to untie his hands?' Well, yes, I was. Yet I still kept my eye on him, for I reflected that though Joze, a little time before, had been so overcome at the idea of being separated from Gertrude, he looked very quiet now. He probably thought he had found a way of escaping from or tricking me, but I was too proud to fear, however little, a man who was at least forty years older than myself. So I undid the putties with which I had bound his wrists

together, and the only precaution I took was to fix one end of my blue woollen belt to the clasp of his leather belt, giving the other end a turn round my wrist. Then I said to him, 'Now we can go.'

## VIII

“HE started off without protest or resistance. We went back by the way by which I had come. By now we could plainly see the road and the banks by its side, in the dull grey morning light. Joze walked with his eyes on the ground, a little in front of me. I held the end of his leash firmly in my hand.

“As I told you just now I felt convinced that the old scoundrel had some plan for tricking me in his head, and that made me start talking again about Gertrude.

“‘We shall have to agree together,’ I said, ‘on what we are to say to the girl. When, after two or three days, she does not see you come back, she will begin to get anxious.’ He seemed suddenly to wake up.

“ ‘Yes, you’re right,’ he said. ‘Well, you had better tell her (he began to think, or pretended to think)—you will have to tell her—that I met you by chance near . . . near Madame Fulgence . . . and that I asked you to give her a letter. I can give you the letter before I leave. I shall just write anything in it—that Baron Somski, as he could not come back to France, has asked me to meet him in Luxemburg, and that I shall be away some time.’

“ ‘This did not seem to me a bad idea, but it again made me begin to doubt whether he was sincere in what he said, or whether he was trying to take me in. Honestly speaking, I was very vexed with myself. I could not help thinking that it was my duty to hand this spy over to my superiors, and if I did not do so it was simply because I did not want to lose his daughter. . . .

“ ‘It was this idea which made me say rather foolishly to Joze, ‘Are you going to continue your trade of spy?’

“ ‘No.’

“ ‘Do you mean that?’

“‘If you thought a little you would see that I am done for now. I cannot stay here, and over there I shall not even tell them how I got caught; they would not believe it, and they would be quite capable of shooting me if they knew. They do not pass things over lightly. So I have made up my mind what to do. Once out of France I shall bury Joseph Archer for ever, and then I shall try to get to Holland and earn my living as best I can.’

“‘What nonsense! you must have plenty of money. I expect they paid you well.’

“‘I? well off? You know quite well that I am not, and besides, what little I have saved I shall leave behind so that Gertrude does not starve.’

“He said that in so natural and sincere a tone of voice that I could not help feeling sorry for him. I pictured Gertrude to myself, alone and penniless, or at least possessing a mere pittance, saved out of the wages of a spy; and when she had exhausted her pitiful little store how was I to come to her help?—I, who hardly

possessed any money at all, and might at any moment be separated from her by the war, or even killed. I felt angry with Joze for having spoilt her innocent life.

“‘Then,’ I said, ‘you followed this vile trade because you liked it?’

“‘I have already told you,’ he said quite calmly, ‘that it is cowardly to insult me; my trade is not vile. I serve the Emperor and I serve my country. If you met a Frenchman doing in Germany what I am doing here you would shake hands with him and approve of what he was doing.’

“I felt that there was an answer to what he said, but I could not find it. We walked on in silence. Suddenly Joze stopped and said to me, ‘We are getting near the huts of the charcoal-burners; if they see you leading me like a dog on a chain they will think that there is something up. So take your belt back and come and walk next to me. I shall not run away.’ I nodded refusal.

“‘Then do not let us pass close by them; we could take the short-cut which comes out by the level-crossing.’

“To this I agreed, and leaving the road we turned down to the right into a copse of young beeches which had been thinned out five years before. About one tree in three had been left standing; between these the young shoots had shot up thickly, and high enough to hide a man. Day was now breaking, and the sky was growing lighter above our heads; the birds began to call to one another from tree to tree, but were not yet on the wing; a cold breeze blew through the wood. I hurried on, for I wanted to get back to Uffigny before it was broad daylight. Thus I came to walk in front of Joze Archer, who, on the other hand, began to lag behind. But, preoccupied as my mind was with the thought of Gertrude, I took no notice of that. As we came nearer to Uffigny it seemed to me that the plan I had made was more and more unrealisable and dangerous. As I was thus pondering, I suddenly felt that my belt was no longer taut. I turned round. Archer, who had quietly unhooked his own belt and left it hanging to mine,



leapt into the copse as I did so, as lithely as a young man. I jumped after him; but instead of trying to get away from me he stopped almost at once, half hidden by a tree-trunk.

“‘You had better not try any tricks,’ I said, going quietly up to him. ‘You don’t really think you are going to escape me, do you?’

“As I spoke I saw something glitter at the same level as my eyes, and a report, not much louder than the crack of a whip, rang out. But I was already on him, and had got hold of the hand that grasped an American revolver. He succeeded, however, in firing a second shot, which missed me again, only the hair over my left temple being slightly singed. We rolled on the ground together in the copse, crushing the young branches and the dead leaves. Archer struggled like a madman, trying to bite my left hand which held his wrist, while I endeavoured to force open his fingers which were clasping the revolver. It was one of those moments when men

cease to be human beings, and try and destroy one another like wild beasts.

“A third shot went off into the air, and lodged in a tree; but his hand was getting weak, and I snatched the revolver from him. Then he bit me in the muscle of my left hand, so cruelly that I uttered a muffled cry of pain. This sent the blood rushing to my head; I lost all command over myself and became nothing but an exasperated brute; I crushed his chest in with my knee, and emptied the remaining cartridges in the revolver point-blank in his face. Immediately he fell back quite still and calm. . . .

“Then I too, *mon capitaine*, grew calm again. Yet I was conscious of having done something terrible, something that I had the right to do, that left me no feeling of remorse, but that was perhaps more horrible for me—the murderer—than for him I had killed.

“The spy had received his due, and he lay there motionless before me. His punishment was all the more just because I had

not willed his death, and he had, so to speak, invited me to kill him. No, I felt no false sensitiveness; I regretted nothing. Perhaps the deep unconscious reason why I felt so calm was that I felt that for Gertrude it was best that he was dead; but for her sake too it was essential that Joze Archer's real profession should never be known.

“He had bled very little. There was just a thin red line, which was already coagulating, flowing under his right eyelid. I felt in the pockets of his jersey; in the inner one I found a notebook. I pulled it out. It was an old, yellow, dirty pocket-book, polished and shiny with age; besides a fifty-franc note and a few bills, it contained that precious identification paper of the real Joze Archer, and a letter in German of no apparent interest, but of which I could understand the origin, for in it there was mention of a ‘factory’ and ‘flower-beds,’ and it was easy to guess from the context that the ‘factory’ was Cissey Fort, and the ‘flower-beds’ the batteries. There was

also a pencil-note in French written in a bad and childish handwriting. It ran as follows: 'I shall expect you on Monday night. Hans is away, so come straight to my room through the pantry which will be unlocked. Herta.'

"'Herta!'" I recalled the talk of the two Boches and everything became clear to me. Hans was the name of the farmer of Gourdenange. Herta, no doubt, was his wife. Evidently she was Joze's mistress and spied for him. So the old fellow had a young mistress! I now remembered that I had been told that this Madame Herta wore many jewels, and was well dressed. . . . Was it for love of the Emperor and the Empire, or was it merely to satisfy the tastes of this elderly Don Juan that he made a business of spying?

"I put the notebook back into the dead man's pocket, but kept the papers of the real Joze Archer, the *billet-doux* of Madame Hans, and the letter in German. I placed the revolver within reach of his right hand, but I could not bring myself to arrange

things to look as though he had committed suicide. With a lack of feeling that astonished me I left the body lying on the ground just as it was, and the only precaution I took in going back was to follow in the tracks we had made through the copse after we had left the path. When I was just getting back on to the path a charcoal-burner's cart passed by, drawn by a donkey and driven by a sleepy old man. I waited till it had disappeared round the next corner, and then made straight for the main road we had left half an hour before, to avoid the group of charcoal-burners' huts.

“I had just caught sight of the first huts through the trees when I was joined by a man who was hurrying along. He was the servant of the Mayor of Uffigny—a certain Ronchery.

“‘I have seen you in front of me for a long time,’ he said; ‘ever since Cissey Hill. I suppose you are on your way back from the fort?’

“He had evidently mistaken me for some one else, who had probably turned down a

side path, while I had come out on to the road a little farther on, and Ronchery must have thought we were both the same person; but I instinctively took advantage of the alibi.

“‘I did not go as far as the fort,’ I answered, ‘but I have been to look at my old quarters from the hill opposite. I like walking in the woods early in the morning.’”

“Then we fell to talking of the war. He was on his way back from the neighbouring parish of the village of Cisseey, where he had gone the day before to recover a loan for the mayor from a shopkeeper. According to what he told me, they were beginning to feel anxious about the military situation. It was said that our troops had suffered a severe defeat in Lorraine, and that, furthermore, things were turning out badly in Belgium. We returned to Uffigny together at about half-past five in the morning, and we separated in front of the turret where I had my office. I hurried to my room and locked the door behind me. There I burnt the dead man’s papers. Thus I

destroyed what would one day have justified me if it should be proved that it was I who had murdered him ; but I preferred to run this risk and destroy every trace of the profession that the father of Gertrude had exercised.

“ When those wretched letters had all been reduced to ashes and smoke, I began to ponder as to what I should do next. It was certainly singular, sir, that at such a time I should have been able to reflect calmly and with a perfectly clear head. It amazes me now when I think of it ; but I can only tell you what happened. I thought things over perfectly calmly. I foresaw that most probably it would take several days for the body of the spy to be discovered ; while, on the other hand, his absence for forty-eight hours or even for double that time would not excite any remark among the villagers, or anxiety on the part of his daughter. They would only think that Archer was out on his rounds among the farms, and nobody would trouble any more about it. So there was plenty

of time to invent some reason for his disappearance. But some reason must be invented ; what was it to be ?

“I still persisted in thinking that it was best for Gertrude that her father was dead ; but Gertrude adored him. She believed him to be an honourable man, and he had always been good to her. Moreover, Joze was the bread-winner for the household, and if what he said was true he left her practically penniless, having probably wasted in loose living the money the Boches gave him. It was now my task to find comfort for her, and means for her to live. To attain this there was only one way open for me. I must ask her to marry me. The war would not last for ever ; as soon as peace was signed I would give up my career in the army, which I was fond of, but which would not bring in enough for us both to live on, and with the education my father had given me I should have no difficulty in earning a livelihood. I tell you all this, *mon capitaine*, as it passed through my mind at that moment, and I can feel, nay,



I can see your surprise in your eyes. . . . I much fear I am beginning to lose your sympathy. You are thinking, 'Here is a fellow who had just killed the father and it seemed quite natural to him to marry the daughter!' I might answer in my defence that I have seen at the theatre a very famous classical piece which arrives at this very solution, and the audience did not seem to see anything improbable in it or to be the least shocked. But, in reality, while I was thinking it all over in my little room in Uffigny, I did not give a thought to the heroes of Corneille. My state of mind was exactly this: I felt no remorse—none whatever—for having done away with Joze. The man I had killed was not the Joze I thought I knew. Moreover, I felt I had not harmed Gertrude; on the contrary, I delighted in the thought that in future it would be I who would work for her. And above all this, or rather overwhelming all this like a whirlwind, was the longing to see her again, to hold her in my arms, to tell her I loved her, that I would be her

husband, and that she could count on me. Was this absence of remorse, this intense joy, a sign that I was overwrought? Was I really in a normal condition? I think not; and what proves it is that, though I had not had a wink of sleep all night, I did not feel the slightest desire for sleep or even any fatigue. And not only was I perfectly cool-headed, but I felt no uneasiness. It seemed quite natural to me that all would turn out all right afterwards. In fact, though wide awake, I was dreaming. . . . Think of it, sir, I had killed a man, not on the field of battle, nor in the trenches; but face to face alone with him, without a witness, and I was forced to hide my deed as if I were an ordinary murderer! Without any doubt that secret was too great a load on my mind, and threw it off its balance.

## IX

“I HAD not the patience to wait longer than seven o'clock in the morning to see Gertrude ; after staying a short time at the telephone, where no messages had arrived during my absence, I hurried over to the turret. Gertrude, clad in a big blue overall, was busy with her young servant cleaning the windows on the ground floor. She left her work as soon as she saw me and ran to meet me, without trying to hide either her surprise or her pleasure, for I seldom came to see her so early in the morning. Standing there in her big apron, which was still dashed with water and soapsuds, she seemed to me even more charming than usual, and above all closer to me. I think that if the servant had not been there watching us, I should have taken her in my arms and

clasped her to my heart. Yes; henceforth she was mine now that Joze was dead; his death, instead of separating us, brought us nearer. She only spoke incidentally of her father, saying that he had left the day before and would certainly not be back for lunch. She urged me to lunch with her at the turret, as she said it was intolerable to be alone with Rimsbach. I promised to do so. When I left she held out her hand, which was still a little red and damp, and when our hands met it seemed to us as if we could not unclasp them. At that moment Rimsbach went through the gate out of the garden, and as he saw us he leered at us, but he was nothing to me now; I no longer bore him any grudge, for you cannot harbour resentment with somebody for merely being stupid; and besides, I felt a little guilty towards him for having wrongly suspected him of being a spy.

“At noon I lunched with Gertrude as I had promised; but I could not stay quite till the end of lunch, for my cyclist came running in before half-past twelve to tell me

I was wanted at the office to take down some German wireless messages which seemed serious. I went off with him, and took charge of the receivers myself; my corporal knew some German, but not enough to be sure not to lose anything in a message sent out by wireless. . . . Throughout the whole afternoon there was an incessant buzzing of messages, some in clear and some in cipher, now French, now German. The Boche ones sent out from Neuheim announced stupendous victories, both in the Vosges and on the Meuse in Belgium, with such enormous captures of prisoners and material that their very magnitude made me feel easier. The French ones, though carefully worded, made it clear that we were face to face with very serious difficulties, both in Lorraine and in the north. A cipher despatch came through from main headquarters to Fort Cissey to say that there was reason to fear that the position was already in danger. Cissey answered that all was quiet, that it did not even hear the guns, and that in any case they were

ready for the enemy. Thus the day passed; I had not even time to think of supper. About eight o'clock the whirlwind of messages suddenly dropped as if by magic. Hastily I swallowed a meal without even leaving my box, and eating off my desk. My head was throbbing with the strain of listening for and picking up messages all the afternoon; I had a miserable foreboding of a French disaster, but the miracle of my strength continued, and I was unconscious of any fatigue. I gave the receivers over to my corporal, telling him that I was going for a few moments to Joze Archer's pavilion, and that he was to have me fetched if the Boches started sending any more messages. . . .

“When I reached the garden, night was falling; it was the hour at which Rimsbach made the round of the rooms and tested the electric lamps. I stood near the gate to watch the windows. In a few moments I did indeed see lights turned on and off behind the blinds, first on the ground floor and then on the first floor; but the ‘manchot,’ out of laziness or because he

was in a hurry to go off to a rendezvous, did not even go as far as the second floor, and so, of course, no lights appeared in the tower. What Joze had confessed to me was thus confirmed; it was he alone who did the signalling. As I continued to watch, I saw Master Rimsbach leave the house and go off across the garden and out through the side gate. Only then did I go over to the turret.

“It was just striking eight on the clock of the town hall. Night had nearly fallen, but I could just see the form of Gertrude, who was sitting on the bench waiting for me; she too saw me and jumped up.

“‘I was so anxious,’ she said; ‘it seemed so long without you. I could not help sending the girl to your office at about six. She saw you through the window busy telegraphing—and then I felt easier. Is it true that there is bad news? There is a rumour in the village that the Uhlans have been seen again two miles from here, at the Pré des Moines. . . .’

“I reassured her as best I could, without feeling very confident myself.

“‘You see,’ she continued, ‘papa has not come home, and he has not sent me any message. If only he has not fallen into the hands of some German patrol. He loathes them so that he would never be able to resist giving them a shot with his revolver.’

“It did me good to hear Gertrude say this. I had not the slightest doubt that she was unaware of the real profession of her father, but the abject baseness of the man who could keep up a continual lie to his daughter, without ever faltering or forgetting, heightened my disgust, and confirmed my conviction that I had done well in putting him out of the way, even for her sake.

“I told Gertrude that the telegrams of the day were confusing (which was true), and that, moreover, the appearance of an enemy patrol was not in itself particularly alarming in a frontier district like that. This seemed to calm her, yet she clung to



my arm with a kind of nervous fear and said :

“ ‘ I am so glad you are there, Benoit. I was at my wit’s end with anxiety. Please don’t leave me any more.’ ”

“ ‘ Even during those moments in which we had felt closest to one another, I had never seen her like this ! ”

“ ‘ But I am not thinking of leaving you,’ I said laughingly ; ‘ I have only just come. . . . ’ ”

“ ‘ But if they came and fetched you, as they did this morning ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Well, I should go, of course, but I should promise to come back again at once.’ ”

“ ‘ Even in the middle of the night ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Even in the middle of the night ; only then you would be asleep.’ ”

“ ‘ Oh, no ; I shall never be able to sleep to-night, and I do not think I shall even go to bed at all.’ ”

“ We were walking side by side as we talked ; Gertrude kept her arms clasped round my arm and clung close to me. We

gradually left the house farther and farther behind us. We followed a path skirting on the left the buildings of the château, and plunged into a beautiful wood of pines, beeches, and maples: it was the same path along which, on the first day of the month, the Uhlans had come at the instigation of Joze. Never before, not even on the previous day, should we have dared to go so far from the house. We were under the influence of the warm, feverish night; the atmosphere was clear, yet charged with the menace of a coming storm; the sky was cloudless, but the stars shone dully, and the absolute stillness of nature contrasted with the growing sounds of excitement which came up from the village. Everything in nature seemed to be sleeping that night, except man. The menace of invasion was getting more definite; you could feel it coming nearer without knowing from which direction. In this extreme frontier region life and property had suddenly become something uncertain, and their value had in one moment diminished till it seemed infinitesimal. I

cannot describe it to you, sir. The ordinary rules of every-day life, the conventions imposed by public opinion seemed suspended; you no longer gave any heed to the opinion of others, but only thought of the essentials of existence. The day before Gertrude and I blushed at the mere touch of each other's hands; this evening we clung to one another as though we were engaged. The consciousness of being all in all to one another at a moment when no one thought of anybody else, except, perhaps, of those who were really most dear to them, seemed to shake off the bonds imposed by our scruples and our fear of one another. And yet this absorption of myself by Gertrude did not make me forget my duty, and I remembered that I must not go too far away from the turret, out of earshot of my cyclist's bell should he come to fetch me.

“Just inside the entrance to the woods we sat down for a while on a bench by the side of the walk, in almost complete darkness. We had hardly done so, when Gertrude nestled against me as a frightened

child nestles against its mother. Still mistrusting myself, I put my arm timidly about her; I was trembling even as she was, but with the desire to clasp her to my breast and melt her being in mine. An instinct told me, as it did her, that our time was measured, and that fate, in giving us to one another, was threatening to separate us afterwards for ever. But she was innocence itself, while I . . . I knew what it meant to clasp the girl that you love to your heart, and that once you allow your feelings to gain the upper hand no barrier can hold them in, and the strongest man is then as helpless as a child. Gertrude, whom I now looked upon as my future wife, to whom I was determined to devote my whole existence, was leaning with her head on my shoulders. I could feel the beat of her eyelids and the coming and going of her breath; my lips were plunged in the perfume of her hair; if she, who was innocence itself, had set about to put me beside myself, she could have found no better way. . . . At the same time she

murmured, 'I am so anxious, so anxious. Oh, my dear, what is going to happen to us?' What could I do but strain her to my heart? How could I not caress her, kiss her eyes, her forehead, her cheeks, her lips that sought mine? How could I help forgetting everything, when she I loved and for whom I longed with all my heart and with all my body appealed so piteously and so trustingly to me?"

For some moments Benoit did not speak, and I could see that though it was painful to him to recall these memories, he was seeking, with that earnest sincerity which was so attractive in him, for words to express an idea that he wished me to understand. A moment later he evidently thought he had found what he sought, for he took up his story again, though now in a lower tone of voice.

"I do not think, *mon capitaine*, that I am one of those people of whom you can say that they have no moral sense. Nevertheless, twice in the course of those terrible twenty-four hours I came to transgress the most binding and solemn laws of our accepted

code of morality—a code which I sincerely respect, as well by instinct and education as with my reason. And at the moment of doing so I conceived no remorse. To-day, not only do I think differently of what I did, but it seems to me as though it were another than I who did what I did during those twenty-four hours. And I can only explain how I should have become that other man, even for a few hours, by saying (as I said to you before) that I was shaken entirely out of myself by the suddenness and horror of the upheaval which was taking place around me.

“Firstly, out of regard for a woman, I compromised with my duty, which was to hand over to my superiors a spy who happened to be that woman’s father. And then I asked a being, whose father and sole support I had destroyed a few hours before, to give me the greatest thing which life has to offer.

“All that I, Benoit Castain, did, and yet I believe myself to be a decent member of society, or at least no worse than others. I

did not feel that what would, in any case, have been a deep injury to Gertrude if her father had lived, became a kind of crime now that her father lay, killed by my hand, in the woods of Haume. . . . I did not feel this then, but I swear to you that I have understood it since, . . . and in spite of all the punishment that I have already suffered for what I did, I know that I have not yet expiated it; and you will know what I mean, sir, when I confess that I am not yet satiated with what expiation I have already performed! Forgive me . . . I cannot go on to-day . . . forgive me . . . I cannot go on. . . .”

There were no tears in Benoit's eyes as he spoke, but his face was contorted by mental suffering. He said no more, and I did not break the silence that ensued, for what words would not have been in vain at such a moment?

## X

AFTER that memorable Sunday in November when Benoit, lying in his cubicle in hospital, began to tell me the drama of his life, breaking off with emotion before he had reached the end, I had to be away from the entrenched camp of Paris for some time, making a tour of inspection in the Argonne.

During that time the order of the day in which he was mentioned was published in the papers, and it came to my notice. It ran as follows : " Wounded for the first time, on the very day of mobilisation, as he was helping to drive an enemy patrol from the country, . . . he received two other wounds on the 12th September at . . . while he was superintending, under a violent fire, the transfer of a gun, for which he was responsible, to a new position, encouraging his



men and giving them an example of absolute contempt of danger. . . .”

When I had returned to my usual quarters I felt some hesitation in going to Versailles and asking for admittance to Room No. 21. Would not an unsolicited visit mean that I was inquisitive to know the end of Castain's story? I was still hesitating, when an orderly brought me the following note, which was accompanied by a manuscript :

VERSAILLES,  
AUXILIARY HOSPITAL No. 15.  
*Dec. 3rd.*

MON CAPITAINE—I thank you from my heart. Your efforts have succeeded, as you had given me to understand they would. I am going back to the front. My orders are to report at the dépôt to get my equipment and then to join the 10th Battalion of the 5th R.A.L. at Beauséjour. . . . Thank Heaven for that: I already feel a new man. You cannot imagine how much good you have done me; I have simply been eating my heart out here. I have only one regret, and that is not to see you again before I go. I should so much have liked to tell you how grateful I am! And I shall not be able to finish the confession I began to make to you

of my wretched story, which was interrupted the other day by an emotion I could not master. To tell the truth, I should be equally incapable to-day of telling you the end, and so I have made up my mind to write it for you. That is what the manuscript is which you will find enclosed with this. I have also added a request which I should probably not have dared to formulate in your presence.

I ask you, *mon capitaine*, to accept this expression of my respectful gratitude, and to believe me your devoted

BENOIT CASTAIN,

*Adjudant à la 10<sup>ème</sup> Batt. du 5<sup>ème</sup> R.A.L.*

I give below the manuscript just as I received it. I had already noticed that when he wrote he was not hampered by his natural timidity, and, consequently, the final part of his story is infinitely better arranged and more complete; while his capacity for delineating the setting of events and the feelings of people who play a part in them sometimes gives evidence of a certain literary gift.

“I have already told you, sir, in what a strange state I passed through the period

of my life which I related to you the other day—a state which was foreign to my temperament and to my ordinary character. I was, in fact, quite beside myself. I remember that I gave you a proof of this—for more than thirty hours, counting the night on which Joze Archer died, the next day and most of the following night, I neither ate nor slept, without ceasing to feel perfectly lucid and vigorous.

“You will have guessed what happened the second night. I left the park with Gertrude I do not know at what hour, but it was pretty late, and with her I went furtively back, not to my own turret, but to hers. For me neither the past nor the future, neither yesterday nor to-morrow, existed; everything was swallowed up in the present, except her whom I loved and who had no thought of resisting me. The depth and intensity of our happiness were certainly increased by the fact that though we had loved one another for several months past, we had each maintained

an attitude of reserve towards the other, and had not permitted ourselves even the most innocent caress. Well . . . what can I say? I have not hidden from you that I hunger to expiate what I did; but I know that nothing in the world can expiate that night.

“It was still dark when I finally fell asleep by the side of her whom I considered as my wife. Literally, I ‘fell’ asleep as one may fall into a dark void. Nature was taking her revenge. I have since learnt that at about five o’clock in the morning some one had knocked at my door and at the shutters of the windows. Not finding me in my own room, my corporal had ventured to do this in view of the gravity of the news. Neither Gertrude nor I heard anything. The same oblivion possessed us both. Thereupon he gave up trying to rouse me and returned to the telephone. You know what news it was he was unable to give me: the whole of the French forces engaged in Lorraine were hurriedly retreating as the result of the check to our vanguard at

Morhange. Important detachments of the enemy were approaching Fort Cissey, and there was no mobile force available to offer them any effective resistance. But Cissey was an entirely modern fort, very recently constructed and very powerfully armed. It was firmly believed that such a barrier could not be taken quickly, and while it resisted there would be time for a regrouping of our forces behind it to bar the invader's farther advance.

“That is what I learnt when, reaching my post at eight o'clock in the morning, and feeling so shattered that I did not even try to explain why I was late, I received Corporal Legrand's report.

“‘Are you ill, quartermaster?’ he asked as I stood there without speaking.

“I glanced at the mirror which hung over the fireplace, and was struck by the haggard look in my face. Ever since I had suddenly waked up at about half-past seven, when the sun was already high in the heavens, I had known that that strange state of over-excitement in which I had been living for

so many hours was over. I awoke to a sense of despair, conscious of the toils in which I was entangled, and of the culpable incoherence of all I had done ; and already convinced, as I have never ceased to be since, that I could never live and breathe in peace with 'that' behind me. Gertrude was still asleep, lying like a bride on her marriage night . . . and a dreadful sob choked me till I had to turn my eyes away from her. Between my dear and me there rose up the figure of Joze Archer lying dead among the bushes with a stream of blood trickling over his temple. . . . I fled from the house without waking her. Happily, no one had seen me go out, not even the little servant-girl.

“ I told the corporal I had slept badly, and then, after swallowing a few mouthfuls of bread — for I was ravenous — I rang up Cissey to ask the news. The man at the other end answered that there was going to be trouble ; we should hear the guns of the fort before the end of the day ; ‘ but, ’ said he, ‘ don’t you worry ; we are ready for them ! ’

“As I hung the receiver up again, the corporal said, ‘Listen, quartermaster.’

“I listened. At about half-minute intervals I could hear a kind of dull thud, not exactly from the direction of Cissey, but perceptibly more to the south-west. It was the sound of the battle which was taking place between the Germans and our forces retreating from Lorraine. Three-quarters of an hour later, as this irritating sound did not cease, getting neither louder nor fainter, I rang up Cissey again; perhaps they would now know something. But this time I could get no answer. . . . I rang again . . . still no answer. Then my corporal tried, for I was so shaken that I distrusted the evidence of my own ears.

“‘Cut off, quartermaster!’ said he, putting down the receiver. ‘What shall we do now?’

“Everything indicated the approach of battle, and I confess that I was glad of it; my duties would prevent me from thinking of my own troubles. Like my corporal, I wondered what we should do now. It was

not an easy question to answer. I and my six men, including the corporal and the garde-champêtre, constituted the whole armed force of Uffigny. The only body with which I could maintain communication was the machine-gun section in the Haume Wood, a couple of miles away. It comprised some twenty-five men under the command of a lieutenant of Reserve. In our rear there was nothing as far as Vincourt and Montguyon. I rang up Vincourt: the line was cut. From Montguyon, however, I heard that our army was retreating southwards as a measure of precaution, although for the moment they were not being pressed by the enemy. I asked the officer in command of the infantry battalion stationed there for orders; he replied that I was attached to Fort Cisse and not to his command; which was true.

“ ‘But, sir,’ I said, ‘you could still tell me what you would advise me to do.’

“ ‘Well,’ he answered, ‘in your place I would endeavour to re-establish communication with Cisse, either by telephone or by



means of your cyclist. . . . If you are unable to do so, wait on events; and if they turn out ill, retire on Montguyon. General Orangis' division is there. But things have not reached that pass yet. Cissey won't be such an easy morsel for the Germans to swallow. . . . Good luck to you. . . .'

"I too believed, as did every soldier, that Cissey was impregnable. The danger was that it might be masked as Liége had been at the beginning of the war, and left behind by the flood of invasion. I collected my five men, examined their arms and equipment, and, far from telling them that we should have to retire, I said that things might be going to get warm in the direction of Cissey, and that we should perhaps be needed there.

"While this was taking place, the mayor of the village came into my room and asked to speak to me alone. He was very excited. The population of the two neighbouring villages, Gagny and Horlonge, had already left for Vincourt and Verdun. The whole of the north of France had been invaded;

there were rumours of atrocities committed by the invader. Our little region, between Uffigny and Cisse, seemed to be spared, standing out above the flood of invasion like an island. No doubt the neighbourhood of the fort protected us. But already the incessant booming of the guns to the south-west was not the only sound of firing to be heard; we could hear it away to the north-west as well. Farmers at Uffigny were loading their furniture on to carts, and setting off on their way to Vincourt with as many of their cattle as they could take with them. The mayor asked me if I had any news or orders. I could only repeat to him what the major in command at Montguyon had said to me, adding that he had better let every one go who wanted to, as they would be no use in case of an attack on Uffigny. Thereupon he went away, and I saw that he meant to advise every one to leave. That was what I myself preferred. In an invaded country the civil population is only an encumbrance. On the other hand, I felt no anxiety about my five men.

We should either sell our lives dearly, or else manage to get away and try to deal with the Boches later on, on more favourable ground. To avoid losing time, I thought the best plan was to leave the corporal in charge of the telephone and telegraph apparatus, which were not of much use now that communications were for the moment cut, and myself go up to the battery of machine-guns. In that way I should be able to reconnoitre the approaches to Uffigny and at the same time put myself at the orders of the officer in charge of the battery.

“But how about Gertrude? What should I do for her? By now, *mon capitaine*, I had got myself sufficiently in hand again not to think for one moment of sacrificing my duty and my men for the woman I loved. Yet I had another duty too—to place her in safety. And, moreover, through all the grief, remorse, and anxiety that I felt, I loved her beyond everything.

While the four men who were to reconnoitre with me were getting ready and

snatching a little food, I hurried over to the turret. Gertrude received me as a wife would her husband ; before the little servant she threw her arms round my neck and kissed me ; her nature was so utterly straightforward that she would have been ashamed to pretend. . . . We went into her house. I explained the situation to her, telling her that the village was being evacuated, and that I myself had to go on ahead to try and effect a junction with a more important detachment. I advised her to collect her most precious belongings and go away with trustworthy people of the village in the little cart which she herself used to drive every week into market.

“ ‘ I have still some three hundred francs left,’ I added, ‘ which I will give you to take charge of ; and I ask you to make use of them immediately you need them. . . . ’ ”

“ We were talking in her own room, and Gertrude was listening to me attentively with her big brown eyes fixed on mine, when suddenly I could not go on any further. . . . I fell at her feet, and, choking with sobs, I

begged her to forgive me. She forced me to get up, and kissed me passionately.

“‘Why do you ask me to forgive you?’ she said. ‘I should have been yours long ago, if I had known what it meant to be yours. I regret nothing, and shall tell my father the truth as soon as he comes in. But what is the matter?’

“When she said ‘as soon as he comes in,’ I unclasped her and stepped back; then, making an effort to recover my self-control, I said:

“‘You quite agree, then? You will start as soon as you can?’ She shook her head.

“‘No, Benoit, do not ask me to do that. Of course, if the village is evacuated, I shall have to go too. But I will not go to Vincourt while you go to Cisse. I shall follow you. . . . Oh, I know I cannot live with you and your men, but I shall stay as near you as I can. I cannot bear to be separated from you as well as from father.’

“I could not shake her resolution. Indeed, while I was attempting to persuade her to leave with the rest of the villagers, I could

not help feeling that I should much prefer not to lose sight of her; it seemed to me that then no harm could possibly come to her. Moreover, Cisseey, which was a more important village than Uffigny, had certainly not been evacuated, for the inhabitants must have come through Uffigny, and we had not yet seen a single refugee. Why should not Gertrude come with me to Cisseey?

“Finally, we agreed on a plan. I would start with my squad in about three-quarters of an hour—which would give her time to make her preparations — and she would follow on with her servant about fifty yards behind us in her cart, in which she would put her most precious belongings.

“‘What will my men think?’ said I.

“‘Tell them I am going to join my father; that will be the truth, for he must have stayed at Argouse farm, beyond Cisseey.’

“‘I could find no answer to this, but I felt a pang go through me as I heard her say, ‘I am going to join my father.’ If there is any truth in forebodings, I had at that moment a foreboding of disaster. My

impulse was to say to her, 'No, no, do not come with us,' but I had not even time to formulate my thoughts, for, at that very moment, there was a loud detonation towards the east, in the direction of Cisseÿ, but evidently much farther away than Cisseÿ, in German territory. The sound was prolonged for several seconds by the echos in the valley, and the last echo had not ceased when another report, also in the direction of Cisseÿ, shook the air. It was so terrific that, artilleryman as I was, I had never heard one equal to it. At first I thought that a powder or ammunition magazine had blown up. Gertrude instinctively pressed closer to me. In Uffigny we could hear people hurrying hither and thither, and screaming. For some time the thunder of the explosions echoed along the slopes of the valley, and then silence fell. A dreadful horror seemed to hover over the village . . . every one waited. . . . For about ten minutes we waited. . . . Then the first of the reports, which had sounded fainter and farther off, could be heard again, and after the same

interval the incredible thunder of the second. Now I understood. Cisseey was being bombarded by the heavy guns which had battered down the forts at Liége. I made no secret of it to Gertrude, who asked me with terror what was happening.

“ ‘And so,’ she said, ‘what are you going to do?’

“ ‘I shall go as quickly as possible to the fort, as I intended to do. Do not imagine that it is going to fall; only you must not come with me.’

“ ‘Why?’

“At exactly eight-minute intervals the report of ‘Fat Bertha’ (though we were seven miles from where the shells were falling) shook the windows of the turret, and made the first yellow leaves fall from the trees; but Gertrude declared more firmly than ever her determination not to separate from me. She had already mastered the fear caused by the first explosion; she was calm in spite of the excitement in her eyes. Again I had to realise that I should not dissuade her from



her purpose. Again I gave way. Six more times the great gun crashed at perfectly regular intervals; it had fired eight times in all. Then silence fell again, except for the distant booming of the guns to the south-east, and a few rare reports to the north. . . . After hesitating for about a quarter of an hour, the villagers began to emerge, one by one, from the shelter of their houses. I could see them coming out timidly on to the road, talking together, and beginning once more to make ready to go. . . .

“Rimsbach was one of the first to leave; he came with an ashy face to Gertrude to tell her that a neighbour offered to drive her to Verdun, where he had an uncle. We wished him a good journey. Later, when every one had enough to do in thinking of himself, the departure of my squadron hardly excited any curiosity, and no one even noticed Gertrude and her servant start off in their little cart.

“The road I had to follow to reach the fort was the same one I had gone by two evenings

before, when I was on the track of Rimsbach. We were soon making our way through the wood. I had not the slightest doubt that the fort would hold out, but the cutting of the telephone line confirmed my too well-founded suspicions, that German spies were active far beyond the line of the fort, in the direction of Uffigny. A sniper in a tree—‘parrots’ we called them—could have put all the shots in his magazine into us before we had had time to find out where he was. So we were compelled to go warily, keeping our eyes open. I sent on two of the most active and alert of my men a hundred yards ahead of us, to march quietly on either side of the road. Two others followed next, just within the fringe of the trees, with the cart containing the two women between them. I brought up the rear with the cyclist Courtaud, who pushed his machine by the handle-bar.

“Courtaud was a careful and brave man, but he spoke little; and I had no inclination to talk. The weather was fine and very hot in spite of the trees. I pondered as I

walked. The place and the presence of Gertrude revived the trouble under which I was suffering. I began to realise more keenly than ever what a serious fault I had committed in wanting to spare Archer for Gertrude's sake. That fault had been the cause of all the others, and of the trouble in which I now was. I did not even know now whether I had done my duty in killing the spy; as to having afterwards taken his daughter, that seemed to me something horrible to have done. Thus grief and remorse were added to the anxiety which the situation caused me. I felt as all Frenchmen felt at that moment, that the war had begun badly, and that the danger of invasion appeared to be greater even than in 1870. Left as I was without orders, I felt that this meant that there was a profound lack of order everywhere. There was another thing that made me really uneasy. Why had not the batteries of Fort Cisseey replied? I had not heard a single shot fired in answer to the German bombardment; not one—I knew the voices of their guns too well

to make a mistake. What could have happened? I could only suppose that the enemy guns had fired from so great a distance that Cissey thought it useless to waste ammunition on them, and was waiting till they came nearer.

“ My little company had now gone some two kilometres without incident, and we were barely a hundred yards from the point where the path turned off which led to the machine-gun battery, when the ‘ Fat Berthas ’ began to thunder again, still in the same direction, and still at exactly eight-minute intervals. The noise was infernal ; the earth trembled as though it would open and burst forth into flame. . . . But this time, during the lulls, I could hear other heavy German guns and ours distinctly replying to them, among others those fine ·220 mortars which I had so often put through their drill. We all came to a halt simultaneously, and I went up close to the cart in which Gertrude, who showed not the least sign of fear, was laughing at the little servant for weeping with terror.

For my own part, the firing, far from depressing me, made me feel calmer. The consciousness of my own responsibilities silenced my personal worries, and for the first time since I had waked up I dared to exchange with Gertrude the look which a husband gives to his young wife.

“I then collected my men about me. I told them to stay where they were under the command of Bombardier Miquel. The cart was drawn as closely as possible to the edge of the roadway, and men were posted on either side, with orders to keep a look-out both in front and behind. I warned them to be on the watch for spies, for there certainly were some in the neighbourhood, while Courtaud and I went to reconnoitre in the direction of the battery; two revolver shots were to be the signal for them to join us.

“The booming of the guns continued, except for that of the ‘Fat Berthas,’ which had ceased after the third shot. In the direction of the battery there was not a sound to be heard. Every one went to his

place, and I started off with Courtaud, after assuring Gertrude that I was not running any risk. I did in fact believe that to be the case, but I should not in any case have ventured into the road leading to the battery with my whole troop without first reconnoitring it. I had a vivid recollection of what I had heard two nights before, particularly the plan to surprise the machine-gun detachment; since then the Boches must have become aware of the disappearance of their agent, and had probably been up to some fresh devilry.

“When you read this, mon capitaine, you will know from the accounts in the newspapers (which, by the way, are incomplete) the story of the fall of Cisseÿ; it occurred so incredibly quickly that I still do not understand it. It was said that the first shots of the big German guns had put out of gear the ventilators of the fort (which had, of course, been marked down beforehand), and had thus rendered the casemates untenable. It was also said that the

ventilators were put out of order by a traitor within the walls; but in reality we do not know what happened, and probably shall know nothing until the war is over. Till then it will remain a mystery how the most modern of our forts in Lorraine could have been reduced by a few shots fired by however powerful a gun. It will remain a mystery how those few shots could have enabled the enemy to push beyond our line of defences into the Haume valley with a rapidity which might have seemed reckless had it not most probably been justified by the knowledge acquired by an elaborate system of espionage. In fact, when I left my companions in order to reconnoitre ahead, it is probable that we had reached the extreme limit of the region, to the north-east of Uffigny, which was not yet occupied by the Germans.

“Rendered prudent by what I already knew, but very far from imagining the situation to be as disastrous as it was, I crept through the woods by the side of the road, with my revolver ready in my

hand. Courtaud followed me with his rifle at the cock.

“In the direction of the fort the firing had ceased. We moved forward very slowly, for the path went uphill, and on account of its many turnings we could not see far ahead of us. Suddenly I heard Courtaud whisper, ‘Look out.’ I stopped, though I saw nothing unusual either on the path or within the fringe of trees—perhaps that was because at that particular moment, owing to the broken nature of the ground, I was standing on a lower level than he. He had laid his rifle on the ground, and now began to climb silently and rapidly up the trunk of a beech. He stayed there gazing before him for a few moments, and then slid down to the earth. He was very pale.

“‘Thirty yards from here,’ he said, ‘there is a French gunner lying flat on the ground, no doubt dead. That black thing you can see over there on that hump in the road is the end of one of his boots.’

“It was now my turn to climb the beech ;



I went up higher than Courtaud had done, and I could distinctly see the little field of battle where the last of the French gunners, who had evidently been taken by surprise in the darkness, had fallen as they were attempting to flee. There was the corpse which Courtaud had seen lying on its face. Farther on, just by the side of the path, there was another with the upper part of the body half-naked; a pool of blood was drying by its side. Farther on still, at the next turning, I thought I could see through the undergrowth a German sentinel standing by the ditch. . . . There could be no doubt that the battery had already been seized, and the whole detachment must have been surprised and destroyed or captured in the darkness before any one could escape, for not a man had reached Uffigny.

“Still, I wanted to make quite sure of what had happened, and ordering Courtaud to wait for me, I said :

“‘If you hear a single shot, do not try and come to my help; you would only get

yourself killed as well as I, for we two alone cannot hope to rush the post. If you hear a shot you must immediately hurry straight back to the others and make them return to Uffigny and then go on to Vincourt; it looks very much as if all possibility of getting through on this side were gone. If you hear nothing suspicious, wait for me here, while I try and find out in what force the Boches are.'

"So Courtaud stayed where he was, while I stole forward into the undergrowth which afforded me some protection. The neighbourhood of the battery was familiar to me; I knew of a rising at about a hundred and fifty yards' distance from the machine-guns whence you could see not only the position itself, but nearly the whole course of the road winding down into the valley, and part of the bottom of the valley as well. It formed a very well-concealed point of observation, as it was covered with a dense growth of chestnuts. I made a long round to reach it, and as soon as I had got there I took in the

situation at a glance. The position was occupied by some fifty Germans, who were distinguishable by their grey-brown uniforms and caps with blue ribbons round them. The four French machine-guns were in their places, and evidently had not fired a shot. A lieutenant and a Feldwebel were studying the mechanism of one of them. A little farther on smoke was rising from a camp kitchen. Nearer to me some men were filling in a ditch where they had, no doubt, just buried their dead. Everything was being done with admirable order and discipline. I succeeded in getting high enough up, without showing myself, to see over the undergrowth and down on to the road and the valley, and I could easily distinguish masses of infantry debouching from the heights on the other side, exactly as though they came from Cisse. At the same time cavalry patrols were riding down the main valley road towards Vincourt, as though with the object of turning the Haume Wood heights and the hill of Uffigny. There could no longer be any

doubt that the fort was already taken, or else had not been able to stop the flood of invaders. In any case it was out of the question to try and push on in that direction with my little band. We must go back to Uffigny or beyond and give the alarm.

“I rejoined Courtaud, and together we returned to our little band. When we reached them, Gertrude, who had got down from the cart, was waiting for us in an agony of suspense. I collected every one about me and explained the situation in a few words; Cissey had either been taken or masked; the Boches had occupied the machine-gun position; the enemy was advancing up the valley, with their cavalry thrown out in a direction I could not be sure of, but certainly so as to threaten our retreat on Vincourt.

“My conclusion was that we must turn back as quickly as possible if, instead of sacrificing our lives uselessly where we were, we meant to warn our people in the rear in time. I then arranged the order of the retreat. Miquel was to ride in the cart

with the two women and whip up the roan mare for all he was worth in the direction of Vincourt until he came up with our troops, which were certainly not farther off than Montguyon. The rest would follow on foot, and endeavour not to fall into the hands of the Boches.

“ ‘But,’ said Gertrude, ‘I do not want to leave you.’

“ ‘Gertrude,’ I answered, ‘there can be no discussion. I am in command here, and I must be obeyed.’

“ She gave way immediately. Just as she was getting into the cart I took her once more into my arms and whispered to her :

“ ‘Do not be afraid. I wish I could go with you, but my duty is to stay with my men ; and, moreover, we shall not go much more slowly than you, and I hope to catch you up this very evening.’

“ I said that to reassure her, but in reality I earnestly hoped that the cart would leave us far behind. The mare was a fast trotter ; I thought she would certainly traverse the woods, the Uffigny plateau, and the forest

between Uffigny and Vincourt, long before the approaches to Vincourt itself were threatened.

‘Gertrude was as brave as could be, and understood the position. She carried her head high; but as I saw the cart, with the two women and Miquel in it, drive off and disappear round the first bend in the road, I felt my heart sink.

‘Then I called out to my men, ‘Now for Uffigny.’

## XI

“WE had hardly started when the guns began again, fairly distinctly, to our left, and I could easily recognise, amidst the din of the other guns, the sharp bark of our seventy-fives.

“I thought things must be improving. French troops were evidently advancing to meet the enemy, and preventing him from issuing from the valley. Surely the cart, and perhaps ourselves, would succeed in reaching our lines without too great difficulty? But there was no time to lose.

“We were, moreover, covering the ground pretty quickly. My men were brave, and they were soon to prove it; but no one cares to be captured or killed without firing a shot. I myself was delighted to find that,

in spite of fatigue, my right leg was quite strong again and troubled me no more than my left.

“ We reached Uffigny without incident, the music of the guns accompanying us without growing sensibly louder or fainter. When we came there we had to wait for the corporal to join us whom I had left in charge of the wireless and telephone apparatus, which we now quickly destroyed. As we passed through the village we felt so sad that none of us spoke ; it had become a dead village where there was precisely not one single soul left ; every door, every window was shut, as though it were night-time, and the streets were empty. Right at the end of the main street a white-black-and-yellow cat jumped out a few yards ahead of us, hesitated when it saw us, then took fright and hurriedly flattened itself beneath a door and disappeared. It was the only living thing we saw. Soon after passing through the village, Courtaud, who was the cleverest of all my men and the best scout I had, touched me on the elbow



and said in a low voice, 'There is smoke in the sky towards Vincourt, which looks very much as though it were being made by burning houses. Do you think those pigs have already reached Vincourt?'

"I now noticed too that the sky, which was perfectly clear everywhere else, was curiously discoloured in the region of Vincourt. But now, after traversing open country for several miles, we were once more entering a wooded district which, stretching from the plateau to the west of Uffigny, spread its dense growth down over the slopes as far as the neighbourhood of Vincourt. Thus we could only see that part of the sky which was immediately above our heads, and that was still clear. Yet to our left the roar of the guns was growing less intense; I could not now hear the voice of our seventy-fives, and I felt very anxious lest the Germans had already occupied Vincourt. I wondered if Miquel would have the sense to turn northwards and try to get round the enemy who was coming up from the south. Oh, how I

regretted at that moment that I had not kept Gertrude with me!

“By that mysterious kind of telepathy which grows up between people who are exposed to the same danger, the anxiety I was feeling spread to my companions. They did not yet dare to tell me what they felt, but I could see it in their faces, and by the way they hardly took their eyes off me. You know, *mon capitaine*, that confidence that soldiers have in their chief in the hour of danger—a confidence so touching that it is like that of a child in its mother? Finally a gunner called Lussac, who came from the south, ventured to say, ‘Quartermaster, are you sure that the road in front of us is clear?’

“I pretended to laugh his question off by saying, ‘What I do know is that it is clear neither to the rear nor to the left, so that we have no choice but to go straight in front of ourselves.’

“As I said this we heard the sound of wild galloping, accompanied by that of the cracking of branches on our left. We

halted and spread out in line by the side of the road ready to fire . . . We waited for a few moments and then saw a herd of frightened oxen emerge from the woods at a distance of a hundred and fifty yards from where we were, and breaking down the undergrowth as they went, rush galloping down the road in front of us. One of them stumbled over a tree-trunk, got up again and then fell headlong into a small ravine. The others continued their wild flight and disappeared round the next turning. For some time we could hear the thunder of their hoofs, growing gradually fainter till at last silence fell once more about us. I took Courtaud aside and asked him what he thought of this.

“ ‘Well, quartermaster,’ he answered, ‘I don’t like the look of it. Those oxen have escaped from a burning stable; did you notice what a smell of burning they left behind them? I believe the Boches have got to Vincourt, and that it was the smoke of Vincourt that we saw some little time ago.’

“For another half-hour we marched on through the woods without incident, and then Courtaud called my attention to a black object at the end of a straight stretch of road on to which we had just come out. His keen sight had detected it before mine had. Again we had to halt to investigate while Courtaud went on to reconnoitre. He soon returned waving his right arm, and at the same time the black object advanced too; it was a man—an artilleryman like ourselves—it was Miquel. I could not help running forward to meet him, and my heart was in my mouth as I ran up to him and asked where Gertrude was.

“‘She is near by, and neither she nor her little maid is hurt.’

“‘What is the matter, then?’

“‘The mare has come to grief: a squadron of oxen suddenly came tearing down the road behind us; the mare took fright and shied straight into the ditch. She has broken up the cart and one of her forelegs as well. Impossible to get her out; but we three managed to scramble out of the cart

without a hurt. The little maid has only scratched her hand a little.'

"You can imagine, *mon capitaine*, that the accident caused me no regret. It seemed providential to me. Just as we had to proceed with the greatest possible care—for our retreat was probably cut off—I found my dear wife safe and sound. I soon came up to where she was. She was saddened by the loss of her mare, but her joy at being with us again made her forget her sorrow.

"'You see, you bad boy,' she said as she kissed me, 'you wanted to separate from me and send me away, but God has decided otherwise, and now you have got to keep me.'

The poor roan, with her broken leg, was lying on her side struggling amidst the ruins of the cart, and I ordered Courtaud to put her out of her pain with his revolver. Gertrude kissed her neck, which was already growing stiff beneath her grey mane, and then we started on again. The presence of the two women made us lighter-hearted, for every one had been anxious about them,

and was relieved to have caught them up.

“I dwell on all these details, *mon capitaine*, at the risk of boring you . . . for the truth is that I dread coming to the real point of the story, which is now not far off; I even wonder whether I shall have the courage to tell it to the end . . . well . . . I will try . . . You will have guessed what was the real situation of our little band . . . a situation which Courtaud and I alone suspected. Vincourt was in the hands of the enemy; the smoke we had seen came from the burning barns of Vincourt; the oxen we had seen in the wood had been chased from Vincourt, and driven mad by the flames. But what we did not know was that the Germans had got far beyond Vincourt, and that we were marching unsuspectingly towards them, and were not more than two miles from their cavalry patrols; if we had been in open country instead of in the woods we should have seen those patrols long before we caught Gertrude up. Thus, blocked in front, on

our left, and in the rear, there remained only one direction in which we could hope to escape—towards the north-east and the Luxemburg frontier; on that side a kind of island still remained temporarily unoccupied by the enemy.

“The only possible course open to us was to cross that island latitudinally, keeping as close as possible to the direction of Vincourt, and ready to turn off to the right immediately we scented danger. I gave orders accordingly, but I was fully aware that the chances were hardly equal of our crossing in safety or of our being captured.

“At about four o'clock in the afternoon, when we had just gone some two hundred yards beyond an abandoned sand-pit which formed a big depression to the right of the road, my men asked for a few minutes' halt to eat a mouthful of bread and drink some wine. I gave them five minutes; neither Gertrude nor I was hungry, and we spent those five minutes hand in hand a little apart from the others.

“‘I can see that you are anxious,’ she

said. ‘Tell me the truth. What is happening?’

“Making no attempt to deceive her, I told her that the whole district was invaded, but that I still hoped to get through by going round the right flank of the Germans. She listened intently, and then said gently, ‘Can they really be so near to us? I can’t believe it; everything seems so still and quiet.’

“It was true. The sinking sun filled the forest, which grew fairly dense and tall just where we happened to be, with absolute stillness. Every sound of firing had ceased, and I felt more hopeful.

“‘Yes, I feel that too,’ I said. ‘No doubt THEY have not gone far beyond Vincourt.’

“We had gone along the road as we spoke, and left the men behind us, eating and drinking as though they had not a care in the world; and we were now approaching a kind of clearing. Suddenly Gertrude’s hand tightened on my arm; she said nothing, but my eyes followed the direction of hers. In front of us the trees grew less thickly,



opening up a little fresh-looking dale, at the bottom of which there evidently flowed a stream, for its course was marked by reeds. On the other side of the stream a small detachment of horsemen had dismounted, and their horses, which seemed tired, were stretching their necks down towards the grass. The men, like mine, were eating, but they were not Frenchmen.

“I quickly drew Gertrude back, and we rejoined the rest of our party without exchanging a word. With a finger on my lips I collected my men together.

“‘The enemy is over there,’ I said. ‘We must clear out and keep to the right. There is to be no talking, and every man must be ready to fire.’

“But Courtaud answered, ‘It’s no use. We’re surrounded. Listen.’

“The forest, whose silence had been so impressive a few moments before, now seemed to come back to life; we could hear the tramp of horses, that unmistakable and characteristic sound of squadrons on the march; and the most uncanny thing about

it was that it seemed to come from everywhere about us.

“ ‘ We must go back,’ I said, ‘ to the sand-pit we passed just now. . . . We can hide there and perhaps put up a fight if we are attacked.’

“ We hurried back, but the little maid turned faint and we had to carry her. At last we reached the sand-pit, which formed a half-moon shape with the excavated part towards the road, from which it lay at a distance of about thirty yards and at a rather lower level. The rear ridge was wooded, and at the highest point there grew a tall beech with its gnarled roots showing. In the sides of the pit there were deep cavities, like caves. As darkness fell we might be able to hide there, and, if the flood of Huns passed without stopping, try and escape by the woods on the other side.

“ I soon disposed my party ; each man quickly found a hole in which he could hide himself as well as if he were in a trench made on purpose for him ; Courtaud and I lay out as far forward as possible, flat on our

stomachs, in one of the cavities. The sound of cavalry came nearer, and we kept our eyes fixed on the road.

“Between the time when these dispositions were ordered and that at which the first Boche dragoons appeared on the road not more than seven or eight minutes can have passed . . . but, sir, it seems to me that during that interval thoughts enough passed through my head, as I lay there flat on the ground, to fill a whole night.

“‘This is the end,’ I thought. ‘We shall be lucky if any of us get out of this trap alive. Well, it is the fortune of war; we have done all we could to escape; everything has turned against us; I am not to blame, and I do not feel guilty on that score. Each one of us will bring down his Boche before being done in himself, and that will make things square. . . . But the women?’

“I remembered all the horrible stories of what those beasts have done to women; rape, mutilation, and other hellish inventions for torturing them. . . . My blood boiled at the very thought of Gertrude, whom I

looked upon as my wife, being made a victim of those blackguards. Sooner than that, I reflected . . . but I did not dare complete the half-formed thought. The sense of being hemmed in, tied and bound by fate, became so overwhelming that I could not help groaning aloud and saying as I buried my face in the sand . . . ‘I have got what I deserve. I have got what I deserve.’ If it had not been for Gertrude, death would have seemed a welcome relief to me.

“Two horsemen appeared on the road, dragoons, clad in dull-grey uniforms and wearing helmets with a cloth field-service cover; they came from where we should the least have expected them—exactly from the direction of Uffigny. Next came a squadron of ten, and then nearly a whole troop. Then half a battery of field artillery. As they passed, the men glanced into the woods to right and left of them, but they did not look as though they thought there was much danger. They had passed through empty villages and had seen for themselves that the population had fled,

while their spies had no doubt kept them informed as to the retreat of our forces to the rear of Vincourt. . . . Next came an officer, with two cavalymen, who passed at the gallop, then an armoured car carrying a machine-gun; then still more cavalry. Finally, whistles were blown one after another all down the line, and the column halted though the men did not dismount. The group that halted in front of us numbered at most twenty horses. The nearest were thirty yards from us; I could even hear them speak. There was a corporal with a black beard and the face of a southerner rather than of a Boche, who was saying, 'Our forces have passed Paris . . . the war will be over in two months.' 'And over on this side,' answered another, 'we shall not have fired a shot. . . . Why, we shall not have so much as seen a Frenchy; they begin to run such a long way off that we never catch sight of them. . . .' 'What does it matter,' concluded the corporal, 'so long as we are back home by Christmas Eve.'

“They were talking thus when a shot was fired from behind me. I never knew which of my men it was that fired. One of them lost his head . . . well . . . warfare is only learnt by warfare. There are few who are quite masters of themselves the first time they meet the enemy. Some quail, others get too excited—— The bearded corporal turned round in his saddle so quickly that it was almost comic. His horse reared up; the others closed in.

“Two more shots were fired from the sand-pit.

“Then an officer cried out something, and the whole troop quickly turned tail, and the road became deserted. I took advantage of this to leave my observation-post and leap down into the pit.

“‘Don’t fire, you idiots,’ I half whispered, ‘they are certain to come back, and then let each of you cover his man, but only fire when I give the order.’

“But contrary to what I expected, the Germans, instead of returning to the attack, seemed to be clearing every one away from

our neighbourhood, or at least along that part of the road that we could see between the trees. Yet we continued to hear that peculiar sound made by masses of troops on the march—a sound which seems to come out of the very earth, and the direction of which you cannot localise so easily as you can a voice or the report of a gun. Amidst all this confused shuffling sound we could distinguish the rumbling of numerous wheels and the tramping of horses. Again Courtaud came to the same conclusion as I did :

“ ‘I say, quartermaster,’ he whispered, ‘surely they are not going to attack us with artillery?’

“ ‘What nonsense . . . artillery. . . . Why . . . where could they find positions for their guns?’

“ ‘Well, if it is true that they studied the whole country before the war they will know that we are on the fringe of the woods, and that there is a big clearing just in front of the place where we rested to eat. . . . Not a bad position for artillery . . . even for heavy guns. . . .’

“He referred to the dale where, as I walked forward with Gertrude, I had caught sight of the enemy. Courtaud, who came from Vincourt, knew it well.

“‘They are not going to amuse themselves throwing shells away into a wood because a few shots have been fired at them,’ I answered. ‘Why, they do not even seem to suspect where those shots came from.’

“‘That remains to be seen,’ replied Courtaud; ‘at all events they cleared out in the right direction!’

“He said no more. Minutes passed slowly by, to the sound of that incessant, vague rumbling of wheels and tramping of horses which seemed to rise up out of the ground. There was now no human being to be seen on the road. No sound of voices reached us. My men began to recover confidence and laugh.

“‘Don’t you understand,’ said Miquel to the man who shared his hole, ‘that the Boches have cleared out? They thought that with fellows like us it was not worth while



trying to fight; it was safer to get away. I wonder if we shall be given the Médaille Militaire? There are only six of us and we have stopped a whole division, and now our fellows are going to attack them in flank from Vincourt . . . you can hear the seventy-fives talking over there.'

"An explosion not far away interrupted him; then there came a rushing, tearing sound through the air above our heads as though a rocket had been let off. . . . Courtaud had time to whisper to me, 'There you are, you see. . . .'

"The shell burst in the woods at least eight hundred yards to our rear.

"I will say at once, mon capitaine, that it was only later and by chance that I learnt the explanation of that unexpected bombardment; for this was only the beginning of the real bombardment. During the early days of the battle of the Marne I was told off, by reason of my knowledge of German, to interrogate a group of Boches, some fifty of whom had been captured together in a barn. Among them

there was one who had been at Cisseey and Vincourt. I questioned him about the affair of the sand-pit; he was a sergeant of artillery and a very intelligent fellow, who had quite understood what was taking place. The French division under General Orangis, driven from Vincourt, had boldly tried to turn the flank of the invaders, but their movement was detected by the German aviators. The German column accordingly took measures to guard against this menace to their flank; artillery were massed on the side of the little ravine which had marked the end of that last stage of our journey. The shots which my men had carelessly fired made the enemy think that the forest was occupied by troops in contact with General Orangis' division, and that they were about to attack. The artillery were therefore ordered to bar all access to the road by means of a curtain fire, and this was done not only with seventy-sevens but with real good 'coal-boxes.'

“Our unfortunate sand-pit lay exactly in the line of fire.

“What they expended in projectiles on that perfectly empty wood (General Orangis’ division had not even been able to enter it) is incredible. For a long time—it must have been for nearly half an hour—their range was much too long in relation to us, and their tendency was rather to lengthen it; as though they wanted, above all, to prevent General Orangis’ division from entering the wood. You have no doubt experienced, *mon capitaine*, how you are inclined to think yourself in safety so long as shells fall at a distance of only two hundred yards from where you are? You feel as though things will go on like that, and that the shells will never come near you. . . . My men began to laugh and joke over the bad shooting of the Boches. . . . I left my post and joined Gertrude and her little maid in the excavation under the beech, whose roots could be seen rotting among the sand and earth. The little maid, terrified by the din, was weeping; but Gertrude was calm. I told her (what I was beginning myself to believe) that very

probably the enemy would not attempt to occupy that lateral point of the wood where we were, and would content himself with shelling it until his troops had debouched from the forest towards Vincourt.

“ ‘Do not worry about me,’ she replied ; ‘ I am afraid of nothing so long as you are there. I too feel more confident, and I really believe they have given up looking for us. But you must promise me one thing. . . . ’

“ ‘ What is it ? ’

“ ‘ If we are unlucky enough to be surrounded, do not let them take me alive.’

“ In a flash I could see in my mind’s eye a picture of what she referred to, as though it were just about to happen, and I said gravely, ‘ I could not do so.’

“ Gertrude made no protest. She only said quietly, after thinking a moment, ‘ Give me your revolver.’

“ I obeyed, for was it not better, in any case, for her to be armed ?

“ When I had explained to her how to use it, I noticed that the shells were falling

nearer to us. I went out of the cave and watched. The sand-pit occupied a space of about sixty metres square, in a semicircle with its base resting on the road. All about us were the woods; raising my head I could see, as though at the bottom of a well inverted above me, a section of sky, still quite light, though a few stars were beginning to twinkle.

“Another shell burst; it was still some way off, but near enough for me to hear the shock of several fragments of the case striking the earth; it seemed as though little pieces of metal were falling from the trees themselves. Evidently the enemy was reducing his angle of fire, and by ill-luck one of their confounded batteries had us in his field of fire. I wonder if I am mistaken or am confusing the dates in my memory, as one often unconsciously does when one tries to recall afterwards the sequence of events, but it seems to me that from that moment I had a foreboding that we were lost. A terrific explosion split the air just close to me; I was peppered all

over with sand, but not knocked down. Courtaud fell five yards from where I was, crying, 'Help, help. . . .'

"As I was running towards him, I suddenly lost all sense of the exterior world about me. I am telling you just what I felt, sir. I did not hear any more shells explode after the one which killed Courtaud. . . . I was stopped as I was crossing the five yards separating me from him, and I can still see him writhing wildly on the ground. . . . Then darkness fell about me and I plunged into the depths of an utter void.

## XII

“OFTEN in books, in which something similar to what happened to me is related, I have come across this phrase, ‘When I recovered my senses . . .’ Well, mon capitaine, that does not express what happened to me when I came back out of my faint. I did not recover my senses; I recovered one of my senses. I began to see that there were objects before my eyes, but those objects did not interest me; I did not connect them, either with other objects or with myself; in fact, vision was not accompanied by any thought. Yet I did see the branches of trees and a piece of sky sown with a few stars . . . nothing more. . . .

“Perhaps that state of inertia in which my sight alone returned to life only lasted for a moment. Looking back, it seems to

have lasted for a long time ; but I have no means of judging how long it was. I did not suffer ; I felt as though I had no body. Then all of a sudden I felt thirsty. And that torturing thirst seemed to awaken my other faculties of sense, one by one. I suffered from a difficulty in breathing ; I seemed to be bound, yet I did not feel the pressure of the bonds—bound as one is in a nightmare by some inexplicable paralysis of all your muscles, and, as in a nightmare, I made vague indefinite efforts to free myself, to wake myself up. One of my hands was free and I could move it. Then I got my right arm free. After that I had to rest and collect my strength for a fresh effort. Gradually my left arm began to move. And then for the first time I realised that I was almost entirely buried in the sand, the lower part of my body to a considerable depth, but my head was nearly clear, though the sand came up to my neck and wedged my chin tight. Now that my right arm was free, I did not have much difficulty in removing the sand from the other. When



I had done that and had cleared the sand away from the upper part of my body, I tried to pull the rest of myself out of the sheath in which I was enclosed. But I was too weak ; I only exhausted myself in fruitless efforts, so that I was compelled to dig myself out handful by handful. It was a very long and tiring process, and moreover I was tormented by thirst. Besides, I was still far from having completely recovered my senses. I hardly thought at all—not more than a dog would who had been buried in sand and was engaged in gradually working himself out. Nevertheless the moment came when I was entirely free, though at the price of such a violent effort that I believe I fainted away again ; but just as my strength was failing me, I was lucid enough to feel that I was dying. The thirst which tortured me soon brought me back to my senses. I was now less stupefied than when I first came to, and I pulled myself together and felt to see if I had any bones broken. My greatcoat was in tatters, my knapsack, belt, everything was gone, and the flask of wine which I

instinctively felt for round my belt had remained stuck in my grave of sand.

“I looked round and threw myself like a wild beast on the body of a man a few paces from me lying stretched out with his face to the ground, and only half buried in the sand; I could see that his flask still hung on his belt; I tore it off, wrenched out the cork, and drank greedily; it was wine; I did not leave a drop . . . the burning sensation inside me instantly stopped . . . but, alas! the wine acted like a philtre in a fairy tale, and restored my memory. . . . I ceased to be a beast fighting at all costs for his life; I came back to myself and took in where I was and what had happened, and I heard myself call out in a low voice, ‘Gertrude . . .’ There was no answer. With a heart so heavy that I was not even conscious that all my limbs were aching, I set to searching all round where I was. At that moment my only desire was to find her dear body chastely buried beneath the sea of sand, and so be certain that she had not fallen into the hands of those swine. But the search was

difficult. Everything appeared so torn and wrecked that it was unrecognisable, and, at first, I wondered whether I really was in the same place I had been in before I fainted. The sand-pit was still there, but it no longer had that half-moon shape that I remembered. It was now a chaos of holes and hillocks, which had no definite shape or form; the centre was filled by an inextricable tangle of branches as if a wood had suddenly grown there. But, in spite of all this, the whiteness of the sand reflected enough of the light which fell from the moonless sky for me to be able to realise what lay around me. A shell, probably only one, had by chance exploded just by the rim of the basin of sand, at the very foot of the big beech, that half-dead tree which in falling had killed two of my men, Lissac and Miquel. Lissac's face and forehead were crushed in, Miquel had his spinal column broken. The man whom I had despoiled of his flask was Courtaud, who had died of a horrible wound in the abdomen caused by a shell splinter. Nothing was to be seen of Corporal Legrand,

nor of the two women. Were they buried beneath the avalanche of sand which had nearly filled up and levelled the sand-pit? Had they escaped by the forest, or had the enemy returned and captured the survivors? This last possibility now seemed to me the most intolerable.

“Exhausted by anxiety and fatigue, I was once more driven to despoiling my dead comrades; weakness made me feel cold. I pulled on Bigourd’s overcoat, which was almost my size. In his bag I found some bread, which I devoured. Another dead man’s flask still contained a little wine. This food and drink which I consumed too quickly, and in a condition of extreme fatigue and anxiety, again brought on a state of bewilderment, in which I remained for some time holding my head in my hands, and feeling at once burning hot and chilled to the bone. Once more time ceased to count for me. Confused visions passed ceaselessly before my eyes; I kept thinking I saw Gertrude near me, and feeling that she was leaving me, that she was being taken

away, that she was lost. The dank, warm breeze which comes with the dawn in the woods in the early days of August brought a little warmth back into my body. I resumed my search; but daylight showed me nothing which I had not realised during the night. The peace of morning and of the forest now enveloped the scene of the disaster. With endless precautions I crept up to the road in which hoof-marks and deep ruts gave evidence of the passage of troops, but the road itself was empty. In the night I had heard no firing, but now I could hear the guns again in the direction of Vincourt, and far beyond Vincourt. Evidently the invaders had passed beyond the spot where I was—which had no strategic value—when, after fearing for a moment an attack from an organised French force, they had ascertained that nothing threatened their right flank. So they had gone. . . . Had they taken Gertrude with them?

“I started on a fresh investigation of every corner, not only of the wrecked sand-pit,

but of all the surrounding woods. I climbed up over the edge which the beech had dragged with it as it fell. Fragments of the broken trunk still clung to enormous half-rotten roots. I went on into the forest, which, a few yards farther in, resumed its normal aspect—tall trees with plenty of room between the trunks, and the earth covered with moss and dotted here and there with rocky hummocks. A hare passed through the undergrowth; birds which had been singing ceased to do so at my approach. Why did I continue to follow the track of a vague, yellowish path? I must have been guided by some instinct or magnetic force, for I had not gone a hundred yards when I saw Gertrude lying motionless on the ground among the grass and moss, but in so natural and easy an attitude that she looked as though she were asleep. I called out to her at once, for I could not wait till I reached her . . . but she neither answered nor moved. . . . In a moment I was on my knees by her side, peering into her face, her closed eyes, and her mouth. There was

breath on her lips ; her hand was damp ; she was still alive.

“ Only then, as I glanced about me, did I notice a hole bored by the shell of a 105 at less than ten paces from Gertrude’s body, and I saw the damage caused by the explosion. It was not very clearly defined, because the shell had exploded in a clearing. Gertrude was apparently unwounded ; neither on her body nor in her immediate neighbourhood was there any trace of blood. What, then, had struck her down ? Sometimes the shock of an explosion will kill a man who has not been touched by a shell ; Gertrude was, however, alive, though I expected that she had received a shock violent enough to render her unconscious for some considerable time. But she was alive, and that thought transformed everything without and within me. I did not even think of the possibility of the forest being guarded by the enemy, and of my being in danger, at each step I made, of seeing a patrol emerge into the clearing. At the same time all my fatigue left me,

and I recovered complete lucidity of mind. . . .

“Not far from where I was I noticed a depression in the ground where the water from an invisible spring fed a miniature pond. I went and filled my flask at it (or rather poor Courtaud’s flask), and on my return I washed my darling’s eyes, temples, and mouth. I did not dare move her before she had regained consciousness, for I had heard that it was dangerous to do so ; on the field of battle, of course, it has to be done, but if possible it should be avoided. As; in spite of my bathing her with cold water, Gertrude still remained unconscious, I tried to pour a few drops of wine between her lips. The effect was almost immediate : she coughed, sighed deeply, opened her eyes, and raised her head. I continued quietly wetting her lips, and at the same time spoke to her, telling her who I was, how deeply I loved her, and begging her to recognise me and answer me. At last I thought her hand responded to the pressure of mine, and then I saw



her blue eyes gazing into mine and her lips move.

“‘Gertrude, Gertrude,’ I cried; ‘it is I, Benoit; speak to me, for heaven’s sake! . . . Are you in pain?’

“A shadow as it were of a smile passed over her face, and I guessed by the movement of her lips that she said ‘No.’ Once more I held the wine to her lips and made her swallow a mouthful. A moment later I heard her say clearly, though almost without any voice, ‘Water.’

“I wished to run to the little pond, but she looked so distressed when I made to go that I gave her what remained in the flask to drink . . . holding her head while she drank.

“Her strength now seemed to begin to come back. Her arms, chest, and head appeared less rigid; her voice grew stronger, and we were able to exchange a few words.

“‘Oh, how happy I feel that you are there,’ she murmured.

“I questioned her eagerly as to how she had come where she was, and whether she

was wounded. She seemed to understand me ill. . . . Finally, after a few moments of silence, during which she appeared to be collecting all her strength to remember and think, she said: 'I cannot well remember . . . the little girl and I were still crouching in that kind of cave at the end of the sand-pit. . . . After you left us there were two terrible explosions near us. We saw nothing more; a cloud of sand hid everything. Then still another explosion . . . and I felt that everything was tumbling down about me. I rushed away through the sand and through the branches, without knowing what I was doing. I climbed, crossed over an empty space, and ran straight in front of me . . . then again it was as though lightning struck the ground where I was, and the earth seemed to give way beneath me. And after that . . . nothing more . . . but now you are there. . . .'

"I had found Gertrude; she lived and had spoken to me . . . she appeared to be unhurt . . . her clothes were hardly torn—

there was only a small rent at the edge of her skirt—yet I felt my heart wrung by a sense of indescribable despair, for I could not help noticing that while her lips and head returned to life, the whole lower part of her body remained utterly still.

“Again I asked her if she was not in pain.

“‘No, not at all . . .,’ she answered; ‘but I am so desperately tired that I cannot get up. My legs seem to be made of lead. . . . Do you think I am hurt?’

“Oh, mon capitaine, how can I express all that I suffered at that moment? Nothing could have been more whole-hearted than the gift we had made each other on the previous evening of our whole being, and I do not feel there is anything absurd in saying that nothing could have been more free of every unwholesome thought, nothing could have been more pure . . . yes, more pure. Only the upheaval and excitement of those dreadful hours could have brought us to it—that and the mystery of the night. Now when Gertrude said to me, ‘Do you think I am

hurt?' it was daylight; the sun had dried the grass and moss, and a bright ray lit up the bodice of my dear. What a tragedy is human love! With a feeling of indescribable grief I now for the first time touched her clothes and sought for the dreadful truth which would explain why she could not move. My very hands grew fearful as I saw that wherever they touched her the flesh remained insensible.

“‘Well?’ she asked.

“I answered that I could find no trace of any wound; but being afraid of hurting her if I moved her on the hard earth I added:

“‘Let me make a couch for you with clothes and branches; I will lay you on it and you will be more comfortable.’

“‘Oh, do not leave me,’ she pleaded, seeing me move away.

“‘I will only be away two minutes, and you will hardly lose sight of me for a moment.’

“I ran to the sand-pit. Once more I despoiled the lifeless bodies, and bringing

back two overcoats and blankets I made a fairly soft bed for Gertrude.

“With infinite care I raised her in my arms and placed her on it; she groaned slightly, and as I laid her down again, cried out with pain, but then she quieted down.

“As I lifted her I felt that the lower part of her body seemed detached from the rest, paralysed, as though the legs were just bags filled with bran. . . . I had known a similar case during my first year of military service; a comrade had fallen under a waggon, which had broken his spinal column. . . .

“When I had installed Gertrude on her improvised couch, I inspected the place where she had fallen on her back; a sharp-edged stone stood up out of the ground; she had fallen right on it when the explosion of the shell had thrown her violently to the ground. I understood it all in a second, and my heart sank . . . sank; for I remembered that the man had died suddenly a few hours after the accident.

“Gertrude saw my trouble.

“‘Do not be anxious,’ she said; ‘I feel better already; you will see; I shall be able to move presently. Those two successive shocks have been too much for me. Come and sit near me.’

“I did as she asked, swallowing by an effort of will the tears that burnt my eyes. Sitting down by her I took her two hands in mine, which were burning hot, but she did not even notice how hot they were, and that confirmed my fears—insensibility was gradually gaining possession over the rest of her body.

“I looked at her hungrily, feeding my eyes on her image; it was she, and yet it was no longer she . . . her beautiful burnished hair made the paleness of her face more striking; her throat hardly palpitated; although she was not entirely motionless there was something strange and terrifying in her whole attitude, in the stiffness of her head, shoulders, and arms; in the fixity of her eyes, which seemed not to move freely in their orbits, and in the stillness of her head, which she moved so

little that it was my eyes which had to seek hers. She was not herself aware of her condition, and she spoke almost without stopping.

“ ‘As soon as I am able to walk,’ she was saying, ‘you will take me away from here. I cannot bear the sight of the forest and the trees—I hate the trees; I feel as though I had been imprisoned among them for years. You will take me right away; I am not afraid of anything when I am with you. You see every one has left us, and nothing evil has happened to either you or me. . . . You promise me you will take me away?’ ”

“ ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I promise.’ ”

“The sun was mounting in the sky, and the weather promised to be as hot as it had been on the previous day. In the distance the cannonade continued unceasingly; but Gertrude did not even seem to notice it any more than she did the ray of sunshine which now shone straight into her eyes. She went on speaking, and you cannot think how terrible it was to hear what she said,

and to see the contrast between her words and the inertia which was creeping over her.

“‘As soon as we have settled somewhere we will marry. Oh, I know we have not done ill, since you were going away, and I did not know when you would come back. But now that everything is peaceful and quiet again we will go to church.’

“What could I say to her? Her memory was evidently full of gaps, and she no longer knew the sequence of events; but as she pressed me for an answer, saying, ‘You will promise me, won’t you?’ I stammered out, ‘Of course, of course, I promise you.’

“But suddenly I gave way altogether, and taking her head in my hands I fervently kissed her hair, her forehead, her eyes, and cheeks, and burst into sobs. The conviction that I could do nothing to save her from death made me utterly desperate, and I could only repeat, ‘My darling, my darling. . . .’

“For some time my sobs prevented me from speaking; and I can remember how a big cock-pheasant flew heavily up



quite near us, and how his wings made that peculiar whirring sound as he passed over the clearing; the hen followed him almost immediately afterwards. Then the silence of the morning descended once more upon the forest, broken only by that maddening cannonade, which seemed to grow fainter every minute. I no longer tried to keep my tears from flowing. Gertrude, whose eyes were dry, murmured distinctly :

“ ‘Then I am going to die !’

“The horror of hearing her speak those words stopped my tears.

“ ‘No, no,’ I cried, ‘why do you say that ? You will be able to get up presently. . . . I will carry you in my arms . . . do not be afraid. . . . I will take you with me. . . .’

“ ‘But since you are crying, it must be because I am going to die’ ; and then she added after a silence :

“ ‘I am so young ; I should so have loved to be yours for a whole long life. Tell me, Benoit, why are you so certain I am going to die ? I assure you I feel no pain. . . . I am only a little stiff.’

“Mon capitaine, you can never realise how horrible it was to hear that changed voice, issuing from those almost motionless lips, utter those words. . . . I could not bring myself to lie to her any more ; those inconsistent words which you can say to an ordinary invalid, lying in bed, tended by her parents, visited and looked after by her doctor, were all out of place here.

“‘I promise you,’ I answered, ‘I do not know what you are suffering from is called. Like you I cannot understand, and am uneasy about that strange dulness which you feel in a part of your body. But I cannot find any wound, and if I am distressed it is because I do not know how to help you. . . .’

“Slowly she shook her head.

“‘No one can help me, for I too feel that I am going. My brain feels as though it were growing stiff in my head. Come near, quite near me . . . like that . . . so that I can only see you . . . not the trees.’

“I had bent over her, with my eyes looking into hers.

“‘I love you so ; I love you so,’ she

murmured, and something like a sob shook her, a sob full of regret for life and love.

“‘My poor Benoit,’ she said a moment later, ‘I feel so weak, and heavy . . . that I cannot even kiss you.’

“I took her hands and bore them to my eyes, my face, my lips. ‘Yes, yes,’ she said again, ‘I love you . . . quite near, quite, quite near me’; then in a voice which was becoming more jerky, broken and shrill: ‘Where is my father? I cannot see him.’ Happily she at once spoke of something else; but her words gradually became less clear and less connected. She spoke of Uffigny, of Rimsbach. She said she hoped I would dine with them. I just looked at her and listened, and I could not help thinking that she was lying there dying, in that clearing, to the sound of the distant cannonade, through my fault. If she had not been my wife that previous night she could not have insisted on following me, she would not indeed have dared to express her wish to do so. She would have left Uffigny with the other inhabitants, and

at this moment would have been safe at Verdun. I bent over her, and cheek to cheek I stammered out those words which I had not been able to restrain once before, 'Forgive me.'

"She seemed immediately to recover all her lucidity..

"'Forgive you? because you wished to make me your wife? but I am so happy you did. It seems to me that otherwise you might have forgotten me . . . now you will never forget me, will you?'

"'Never; you are my own wife.'

"'Yes, your wife,' and she repeated slowly, 'Your wife.'

"The rigidity of her face and neck became more and more marked, but her mind seemed to have become quite clear again. Only she could not, so to speak, complete her thoughts; she passed from one subject to another as though she could not dwell on and finish any one of them. And then, *mon capitaine*, there came the last and most dreadful ordeal I had to suffer, the memory of which still to-day

burns me as with a red-hot iron. She said clearly :

“‘I am afraid my father has been captured.’

“‘I did not answer.

“‘You will look for him, won’t you?’ she went on; and then, as though my silence surprised her, she added pleadingly :

“‘Promise me you will look for him—that you will not forsake him. He was so good and kind; he was very fond of you. . . . You will tell him that I became your wife. . . .’

“‘Ah, what those words made me endure. . . . I honestly believe it was greater suffering than the most ferocious torturers ever invented . . . but I had to answer her, for she seemed to fret and grow impatient at my silence.

“‘You promise to tell him all that has happened? I insist on it . . . I insist . . . promise me. . . .’

“‘I promised. . . . Thus the last words I exchanged with the only woman I have loved were poisoned by a lie, and that man

I had killed came like a ghost between us. It was so horrible that I felt it less when Gertrude suddenly gave a cry of pain. I asked her where she was suffering, but she answered almost at once that it had passed.

“‘Kiss me now,’ she said.

“I bent over her, taking care not to move her, and only touching her lips. Whether it was that the warmth of my own face and feverish mouth conveyed warmth and life to hers, I know not, but it seemed to me as though her whole being revived, and that that kiss expressed all that we had felt for one another on that fatal night.

“Then I heard her murmur, ‘I love you . . . my husband. . . .’

“She said no more, and no doubt I held her in my arms long after life had quitted her poor helpless body.”

There had evidently been a pause in the compilation of the manuscript after these last lines were written, they were in so agitated a hand that in two places the

pen had torn the paper. Had Benoit been disturbed at that moment? or was it that the weight of his confession had been too heavy upon him, and had made it impossible for him to go on?

Whatever the reason, the fact is that the remainder of the manuscript—three short pages in fresher ink—was, on the contrary, written clearly, soberly, and, as we shall see, in another style.

I give it here just as it came to me.

“Mon capitaine, now you know my story. You know why I cannot accept life like every one else and say, ‘Bad times will pass, and the day will come when it will be possible to be happy again.’ I can never be happy. I cannot say that before meeting Gertrude I was happy. I did not get much pleasure out of life, but I had good health, a clear conscience, and I was fond of my trade. From the moment when I came to love Gertrude till the night when I struck down her father in the Haume wood, I learnt how much joy

can be contained in the ordinary fact of being alive. And then, no doubt, I plunged too deeply into that new-found happiness, till I almost forgot the tragedy in which my country was struggling for her life—till I forgot the moral laws which I never could have believed myself capable of transgressing. Since then I have examined my conscience. I know which were the two great faults I committed; I have told you them, but I want to repeat my confession here. The first one was when, having caught the spy in the act, I ought to have handed him over to my superiors, and did not do so because of Gertrude; so I failed in my duty, and proved myself a bad soldier. The second one was when, having killed the spy, I possessed his daughter. And, you see, *mon capitaine*, that was the graver fault of the two, because I deceived the woman I loved. If she had known the truth she would have repulsed me with horror. I was punished for this lie by the necessity of lying to her again at that supreme



moment when entire communion of my soul with hers was the only thing which could have brought me some consolation. . . . A lie befouled the last words I spoke to her and the bitterness of that will poison me as long as I live. . . .

“And so what is there for me to do in life? For me, life has lost not only all that can render it desirable but all that makes it tolerable. Only the war, with its relentless necessity for action, mitigates to some degree my moral sufferings. I tell you perfectly sincerely and simply that my hope is that the war will last longer than I do. I cannot conceive continuing to live once the war is over. I would not take my own life, for that is contrary to my ideas, but I think I should go mad. . . .

“You will now understand why, in spite of all the kindness you showed me, I never behaved towards you as I ought to have done, and as I could have wished to do—those months in hospital were purgatory to me. Do not judge me harshly . . . it was not I you knew . . . it was a mere wreck

—weary of keeping his head above water, and only desiring to go under for good.

“Thank God, I am now going away, back to the war. I will write to you what happens to me since you are good enough to be interested in me. When you receive no more letters do not pity me, for there will have happened what I promise you I shall not have sought, but what will be the happiest thing that can happen to me.

“If that comes to pass I entreat you to grant the request which I am about to make to you. . . . I buried my darling in the sand of the pit, for I had nothing with which I could dig the earth deep enough, and I dreaded being myself surprised and killed before I had completed my task. I put nothing to mark her grave, but it is perfectly easy to find with the help of the little sketch which I enclose with my letter. As you will see, you have only to follow the side of the road towards Vincourt, and first count twenty-five steps of a metre long each from the milestone numbered twenty-five (all the maps show this road through the

forest from Cisseÿ to Vincourt), and then six steps perpendicularly towards the sand-pit. The grave begins at the sixth step. . . . If it is my fate to survive the war I shall take Gertrude's body wherever I may happen to be. If I do not survive and my body is found, I entreat you to lay us together in the cemetery at Uffigny, My will, which is in my father's possession, gives effect to this request, and provides the necessary money out of the legacy my mother left me and which I have never claimed.

“I have now told you everything, mon capitaine, and yet I feel reluctant to finish my confession, as though it were the last occasion I should have of talking to you. And yet what more is there to say? Have I told you how I got through to the French lines after I had buried Gertrude? I cannot bring myself to reread what I have written to be sure whether I have or no. In case I have not yet told you, this is how I managed it. I walked straight in front of me without choosing my way, by preference at night. Kindly peasants gave me civilian clothes,

sheltered me and gave me food, and by pure good luck I reached our lines with no other incident than a fusilade at the bridge over the Tonge between Vincourt and Verdun. Afterwards I was all through that splendid campaign in Lorraine, which is little known about, which no one in France talks about, but which ranks with the battle of the Marne as one of the finest things in the war.

“ You tell me that I was reported to have been ‘heroic,’ but I do not want you to believe it. I am not and have not been a hero. I just fought as though I were in a dream, and all I want is to get back into the firing-line again.

“ Mon capitaine, I take leave of you with all respect, and I recommend to your kindness and to your pity my last request.

“ BENOIT CASTAIN.”

These lines were written in February 1915. Since then nearly a year has passed, and I have received in all five letters or cards from Quartermaster Castain, each of

them containing a simple reiteration of his "gratitude," without any further particulars. The last was dated September 1915. Shortly afterwards there occurred our victorious offensive in Champagne, in which the battery to which Castain belonged took part. He had just been promoted second-lieutenant. On the evening of September 20th he was reported missing, and all my efforts to obtain news of him have been in vain.

I have not yet been able to discharge the commission he gave me. The country in which Gertrude Archer is buried lies on the fringe of a region which is in the occupation of the enemy. It will not be long before the enemy evacuates it, but yet he is still there. . . .

Like so many other acts in the life of France, the last wish of Benoit Castain will no doubt be realised only on that date which still lies hidden in mystery behind the veil of those words "after the war."





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